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Coconut grove at Ben Tré

# REPORT ON INDO-CHINA

*by*  
BERNARD NEWMAN

814

WITH 46 ILLUSTRATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

### I

**I**N April 1918, I pitched my tent on the outskirts of Reninghelst, near the French-Belgian frontier. The tumult of the battle for Mount Kemmel was deafening: the roar of gunfire drowned even the noise of traffic on the *pavé* road.

Now a long convoy of French lorries was passing. I looked at the drivers in some surprise. I knew that the British had brought over thousands of Chinese labourers, but apparently the French were now using Orientals as motor drivers. These handled their vehicles competently, and their assistants were unusually smart in applying wooden stoppers to the rear wheels whenever the convoy halted.

Then a little dog made a foolish decision to cross the road. Long ago it had been his road, and he did not understand that it was unwise to dispute it with military traffic. He was struck by the last lorry, and killed instantly.

A corporal jumped down, and together we attempted to mollify the dog's owner. After a preliminary tirade against the miseries of war, she accepted the situation philosophically. But by this time the convoy had moved on: the little corporal looked at me in despair.

"You'll never catch it up," I said. "However, there's only this one road—it's bound to come back this way. You'd better wait here."

He, too, was evidently a philosopher, and squatted on his heels beside my tent.

"You are from China?" I asked.

"Oh, no, Cochin China—Little China," he corrected—he spoke quite good French. "I am Annamese."

It was the first time I had met one of his race. For two or three hours I plied him with questions. I gathered that the Annamese may have been of Chinese origin, but that they had emigrated to the south thousands of years ago. For long they



were held subject by Chinese emperors, but then regained their independence. And now their three provinces—Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China—were under French rule. The names aroused memories of geography lessons at school.

He talked of his people: of their simple life and strange beliefs. I heard stories of dragons and spirits, good and evil: of savage tribes among the mountains: of fertile rice-fields with crowded populations.

"And the French?" I asked: for this was the era when President Wilson's Fourteen Points had raised new and awkward aspects of colonialism.

"They do well. They have done much for us. But——"

"Yes—but?"

"They are French. We are Annamese. We are good friends, but poor servants."

"You mean that there is discontent?"

"Oh, no. Not yet. But it will come. I repeat, the French have done much for us—our country is far better ruled and more prosperous than ever it was. And yet—one people cannot rule another for ever."

"Are there many who think like you?"

"No. We are still children. I never had such thoughts myself until I came to France, and talked to the French."

## II

In 1947 I wanted to get from Burma to Japan. At the airfield of Rangoon I found that an R.A.F. aircraft was due to leave for Hong Kong. Alas, it carried no passengers—only mail.

I went to the room where the crew were feeding, and infiltrated myself. At a suitable moment I brought the conversation round to the subject of spy stories. To my delight I discovered that the captain was an avid reader of such thrillers: so I revealed myself, and was promptly enlisted as one of the crew. My principal duty was to brew tea every two hours, but I fear I was not very competent.

We halted for the night at Saigon: and bad weather conditions held us there for another day. The R.A.F. men knew the place well—especially its black market in currency: they also

knew which goods could be bought cheaply here to be sold at a very considerable profit at other points in their travels. All the crew would have had a great success in international commerce.

I noticed that they kept strictly to a group of streets in the centre of the town.

"Oh, this place isn't healthy," they said. "There's some sort of a war on."

They were not quite sure who was fighting whom, but were emphatic that it *was* a war.

A French officer confirmed this. Across the river were inviting groves of waving palms.

"How do I get across?" I asked.

"You don't!" he said emphatically. "One of our people went across a few days ago and didn't return. We sent six policemen after him. They sent back the seven bodies."

"Who are 'they'?"

"The Viet Minh. Rebels—Communists—I don't know. All I know is that they are tough, and stop at nothing. We hold Saigon and a few other towns, but we can only go from one to the other by day, and only then in protected convoys."

"And at night?"

"The night belongs to Viet Minh. Be careful what you do after dark."

It so happened that in the evening I met a local man who spoke excellent French. He began to give me an outline of Viet Minh—I shall quote from it in a later chapter.

"They are not really Communists, but Nationalists," he said. "There is much discontent with the French."

"Yet I gather that the French have done a lot of good here."

"Materially, yes. But look at the change in the political scene. Syria is free: India is to be free this year. What of Vietnam?"

"Vietnam?"

"The land of the Southern Viets. You know it under the names of its provinces—Tonkin, Annam, and Cochin China. The three make up Vietnam. Do not confuse us with the people of Cambodia and Laos—they are quite different."

"And Viet Minh, you say, is the Nationalist movement?"



"Yes, as in India. It has its own Gandhi—a very different type, but with the same aim. His name is Ho Chi Minh. No, not this café—it is not good," he said hurriedly, as I suggested a halt for refreshments. He led the way to another just down the road.

He continued to expound his theme. He had no hard words for the French, save that they had not recognized the inevitable trend of events.

"We want to be friends with them. They are welcome here as merchants—but not as rulers."

Suddenly I heard the sound of an explosion.

"Was that a bomb?" I cried.

"Probably."

I noticed signs of excitement in the café we had rejected. I ran along. Two men lay between its tables, bleeding copiously from multiple wounds.

Nobody knew what had happened: that is, no one would say. But I had witnessed similar scenes in Egypt, where heroes delighted to throw bombs into crowded cafés and make off in the confusion; this, apparently, was characteristic of the new style of warfare.

I went back to find my Vietnam friend, but he had gone—maybe he realized that he had compromised himself rather deeply in refusing the café selected for the night's episode.

When I returned to Saigon, weeks later, I made no evening promenade—I do not enjoy the sight of mangled bodies. But even my rest at the hotel was disturbed by a sharp explosion.

The tense atmosphere did at least have one effect—to stimulate my interest in Indio-China, and to determine me to return at the first opportunity. This did not come until 1953.

### III

"You didn't tell me that you were going to Indo-China," said a foreign friend who is often engaged in strange enterprises.

"Well, I haven't seen you lately——"

"The Russians are very interested in your journey," he added.

"What, again?"

"They want to know why you are going."

"If you are in touch with them, you can tell them—to write a book."

"They would not believe that—it is too simple. They believe that your visit concerns the Viet Minh war—and they want to know how."

The Russians have always taken a flattering interest in me. It so happens that I have written a large number of fictional spy stories. The Russians translated one of them—without permission or payment—and used it as a factual text-book in their Intelligence schools. In this (*Spy*) and other stories I have featured myself as a character, and apparently the Russians refuse to believe that the yarns are fiction: they credit me with being an important British agent! This has led to more than one peculiar—and sometimes amusing—episode in many countries.

"I managed to pick up the name of the man who is to look out for you and find out why you have come," said my friend. "It is understood, there seems to be no question of liquidating you, or anything like that—they just want to know. Keep a look-out for a man named Dr. Le Van Tam. I do not guarantee this exactly—it was picked up only phonetically."

"I should very much like to meet Dr. Le Van Tam!"

#### IV

My journey was made in April, May and June, 1953, and is recorded here. The first chapters of the book were written on the spot, while impressions were fresh in my mind. The later chapters were compiled after my return home, after I had had time to think over the extraordinary complications of the Vietnam scene. Usually it is not too difficult to identify the problems of a country, and even to present them simply: their solution may be quite another matter. But I have never approached a question as complex as this, and in the process of simplification may have made it appear far more straightforward than it really is. Even if circumstances were normal it would be complicated, but it is still further confused by our lack of comprehension of the Eastern mind.

Yet it is vital to understand the problem. A glance at the



map is enough to show the danger of the situation—the menace, that is to say, to those who do not wish to see a world under Communist domination. A Viet Minh victory in Indo-China, with Chinese support, would make the British position in Malaya untenable—and, apart from the fact that the bulk of the 'bandits' there are Chinese, not Malays, that region is the biggest dollar-earner in the sterling group. Resistance in Siam would be slight: the Thais are not a warlike people, and a large Chinese fifth column is already established in the country. This would involve the virtual isolation of Burma—which is already fighting two Communist armies. Thus a Viet Minh victory would almost inevitably involve the complete transference of South-East Asia to the Communist bloc. I would have nothing to say against this if it were what the people wanted.

Indo-China always was strategically far more important than Korea. Yet so far it has been given only a fraction of the attention in the democratic countries. This record of my journey will perhaps enable us to make up our minds before it is too late.

## v

Indo-China looks on the map as if it might be a single entity, but actually it is very divided politically, geographically and ethnically.

Until recently it consisted of five provinces. Laos and Cambodia were French protectorates, but are now independent states within the French Union. Tonkin and Annam were also protectorates, and Cochin China a French colony: these three now combine to form the new state of Vietnam.

Laos and Cambodia are sparsely populated. Save for the Mekong valley, Laos consists almost entirely of mountain forest and jungle: Cambodia has great plains capable of development, but the placid contentment of its people militates against enterprise, and it supports a population of only four millions. Over twenty-three millions inhabit Vietnam, however, and over twenty millions of these are Vietnamese.

Yet the country is a geographic curiosity. The bulk of the population is crowded into two river deltas—that of the Red River in Tonkin and of the Mekong in Cochin China. Here

rice is intensively cultivated, and the two small areas have a density of population scarcely rivalled in the world. Smaller rice areas in Annam are also exploited, and irrigation works have extended the areas suitable for rice-growing, but the greater part of Vietnam is only sparsely populated—and that by backward tribes not of Vietnamese stock.

The north and west of Tonkin are entirely mountainous, and the bulk of their people are Thais—near relatives of the Laotians and Siamese. There are minorities of Man and Muongs, primitive tribes which probably occupied the region before the Vietnamese moved in from Southern China, and in the extreme north-western corner is a small compact group of Sino-Tibetans.

The Vietnamese occupy the Red River delta in great numbers: there they cover a narrow ribbon southwards down the coastal plain of Annam, which in places is scarcely ten miles wide. Behind it is more mountain country, the first belt occupied by very primitive Moïs tribes—often considered to be of early Indonesian stock—and the second by Laotian Thais. Then, as the southern plain begins, the Vietnamese again become dominant, with minorities of Cambodians and Chams. In Cambodia proper it is the Vietnamese who form the minority. There is one other important ethnic element: wherever there is trade, there are Chinese.

The ethnic distribution seems to be determined by altitude rather than by the more usual geographic features. The Vietnamese are essentially a people of the plains: to them, land means rice-fields. It is only recently that, driven by the intense over-population of the deltas, they have begun to move to the uplands, where there is land for the asking.

The Cambodians and Laotians also prefer low ground. The Thais and Moïs, however, are unhappy at altitudes of less than 3,000 feet—and the Meos and Man refuse absolutely to live at less than 4,000 feet. Land culture of course varies with altitude, and thus with the various peoples. The Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians are primarily rice cultivators: the Thais and Moïs grow rice by the 'dry' method—to be described—but also grow maize. Those favouring higher altitudes favour pavo and maize, with rice where it will grow.

Indo-China is part of the great rice bowl of South-East Asia. Before the war it not merely supported its heavy population,



but exported two million tons of rice a year to neighbouring countries like China and Malaya. The Japanese occupation, followed by the present civil war, or Communist rebellion, has cut this down severely, with serious effects. In Europe we talk of gold standards, but in South-East Asia it is only the rice standard which counts. We estimate our cost of living on the price of a hundred essential commodities: there only one matters—rice.

This suggests that life in Indo-China could be simple: it often is. There are many parts of the region where people could be very much better off at the expense of a little enterprise and exertion, but the local way of life prefers ease and simplicity. The present war occasions a great deal of inevitable hardship, but the countries of Indo-China differ from some others which are emerging from colonial tutelage: they are potentially rich. Given the energy necessary to all progress, they could support a large population on a standard of life at least equal to that of their neighbours—probably higher. But before this happy state can even be approached one essential condition must be fulfilled—the restoration of peace to this distracted region.

## CHAPTER ONE

# CAPITAL OF VIETNAM

### I

THE Rue Catinat is the principal street of Saigon. It is neither Eastern nor Western, but a jumble: it contains no buildings of dignity, but has rid itself of shacks. Significantly, it leads direct from the docks to the cathedral—trade and religion were the first French introductions to Indo-China.

Its shops reflect its multi-racial interests. A French milliner's shop, as smart as any in Paris—and much more expensive—is flanked by an Indian grocer's where almost anything edible is on sale: on the other side is a Chinese bazaar, offering clothing and anything else the proprietor calls to mind, from jewellery to dried fish.

The pavement crowds are as variegated. Here is a European in the glory of his white 'tropicals': his wife favours a smart off-the-shoulder frock, which looks cooler than it presumably is. Yet she is outshone by local girls in sheath-like dresses: a long flap back and front, meeting tightly under the arms to emphasize a delicate breast: then falling loosely over white satin trousers: it fits so snugly that you would swear that the girl had been sewn into it, but I was assured that there are more normal means of ingress and egress: emphatically a costume for the slim figure. Pregnant women could never attempt to conceal their condition even at an early stage: nor do they attempt to do so, for it is a state of honour.

Working women favour a simpler outfit: a little white jacket with black trousers: or sometimes a black jacket with white trousers. The carriage of the petite Vietnamese women is magnificently erect: a Victorian mistress of deportment would have delighted in their straight backs.

Faces are Eastern, with a strong suggestion of China—but complexions a very pale brown rather than yellow: pleasant



faces—the women, especially, often of great charm—matched by gentle, soft-speaking voices.

The general impression is of well-being. Most of the men seem to favour European dress—the women, wisely, cling to the fashions designed to suit them and their work. But among the crowd are bare-footed coolies who are scarcely covered by a few rags: sometimes only by an apology for a loin cloth. In the climate of Saigon a loin cloth is actually a sufficient costume, for even in April it is hot in Saigon, but its use is the badge of poverty.

The side streets exhibit the Eastern characteristic of life in public. Some families take a belated sleep on the pavement. Near by, barbers operate, their mirrors propped up against somebody else's window: here is a dentist, a pile of extracted teeth as evidence of his skill. A client arrives, sits on a box, and in a few seconds the offending molar is removed—without anæsthetic and, usually, without vocal accompaniment.

Privacy is meaningless or even anathema to the Oriental. The pavement is his club, the nearest public water tap an opportunity for his morning toilet. Innumerable little stalls display remarkable and colourful things to eat. Itinerant vendors wander in hordes, offering the most unlikely merchandise. Everyone seems to be selling something. A single street will present services from boot cleaning to those of doctors and fortune tellers. Specialization seems to be the key to life. Since most taxi passengers are conveyed on bicycles, enterprising mechanics have established service stations where for a penny they blow up the tyres of the bicycles. I never saw people so ingenious in devising methods of serving each other's needs for gain. The French aristocratic refugees who lived by taking in each other's washing were unimaginative amateurs compared with the people of the East.

The *cyclo-pousse* deserves a special word. When I was last in Saigon you took a rickshaw behind a trotting coolie, and felt self-conscious and degraded. Now you mount a bath-chair with a bicycle fixed behind it: to be more exact, a tricycle with a bath-chair in the front. Propulsion is applied by a ragged coolie, and a journey can be an adventure.

Accustomed to the topographical erudition of a London taxi-driver, you give the required address to the coolie: he begins

to pedal. Not until much later do you discover that he has not the faintest idea where the address is: he is quite happy about it—if he does not get you to the place you want, he will take you somewhere else, which will doubtless be just as good. It is quite useless to take a *pousse* unless you know the way—otherwise your man will keep on pedalling in a straight line, and unless you stop him may finish in the sea or in China.

A supply of extra arms is useful. You need the normal two in order to indicate right and left turns—not to following traffic, which will ignore your signals, but to your own conductor. The additional limbs are required to ward off pedestrians who step hopefully into your track. Your coolie may attempt to avoid them, but his brake is under the seat of the cycle, and sometimes needs both hands to operate it: thus, while avoiding peril to one errant voyager, he may incur it for another—or for you.

Nor are the cycle manufacturers very considerate, for they supply machines with rat-trap pedals—which are hard on bare feet, however tough. The coolie counters this by wrapping rags around the pedals, or by wearing slats of wood as shoes, held on to the feet by canvas straps.

Fortunately Saigon is flat, so that he can propel even a hefty client. Europeans generally travel alone, but Easterns like value for their money, and often crowd two into a *pousse*. Once I saw a woman and two children in the chair, while the driver was required to carry a naked baby on his hip as he pedalled.

The driver hires his *pousse* from an entrepreneur—almost invariably Chinese. It is his home—he sleeps in it at night. The business is overdone—it is the last resort of the unintelligent coolie who can do nothing else. Consequently there are far too many *pousses* on the streets for economic purposes. This keeps down the fares. The coolie does, however, share one characteristic with the taxi-drivers of the world: whatever you pay him, he looks for more.

## II

Saigon is economically fortunate: its own river carries ocean-going steamers right to its front door. Not that this is imposing, for the dockside is crowded with a maze of sampans housing



thousands of floating families: there are even shops on boats, visiting their nautical customers. It is only by superlative feats of seamanship that the big ships manage to approach the quays without crushing a dozen of these unsubstantial floating homes.

Away from the city centre are residential suburbs—suggestive of France, yet with an Oriental touch: boulevards lined with tamarind trees: villas with balconies open to the sky. Then, a few hundred yards away, a suburb bordering one of the branches of the river, its crowded bamboo houses built on piles, as simple and primitive as anything in Vietnam. In between are groups of office buildings: they once housed the French administrators, but have now been taken over by the civil servants of the new Vietnam.

Yet I most liked the side streets of the Vietnamese quarter. Here colour prevails. The butchers operated in state, standing importantly on a platform beside a huge round block. Their wares were highly glazed—chickens in red, pork in brown. The fish stalls betrayed their presence afar off. The dried fish was not necessarily odoriferous, but the fish sauce for the rice was always pungent.

Eastern people seldom wrap their food in paper—they prefer a piece of string or vegetable raffia. A whole fish can be strung through its gills, but a cutlet presents a delicate problem in balance. I saw one couple walking off proudly with a piece of pig's ear: the man followed behind his wife to ensure that the succulent morsel did not escape from its string noose: as he walked he made expressive noises—his mouth watering, I presume. One woman faced a most difficult task: she had bought a small piece of ice, and strove to fix a single loop of string about it. I left her still involved with the problem—I had only a week to spare.

Red stains on the pavement did not suggest Sherlock Holmes trails of blood. The betel nut—actually the nut of the areca palm within a leaf of the betel vine which often entwines it—is the chewing-gum of Indo-China. It produces a crimson cud, which is deposited with a splash frequently and energetically. It is claimed that betel chewing is good for teeth and gums, but experts deny this—certainly the local teeth are no advertisement for it. It is also said to act as a mild drug, invoking a warm and invigorating feeling. I can offer no authoritative

opinion, for the crimson spittle did not invite me to personal investigation.

I looked at the shops: then, staggered by the prices, hurried back to find what my hotel was costing. Indo-China must be easily the most expensive country in the world. Even a millionaire might quail before a charge of 5s. for a pat of butter. Immediately I put into operation a series of economy measures which even a Scottish Chancellor of the Exchequer might have envied. Hotel meals were promptly abandoned. I made my way to the barracks, calculating that some enterprising merchant would have established an eating-house for ever-hungry yet impecunious young soldiers. I found that he offered ham and eggs for 4s. 6d., and this became the staple of my diet.

Yet, apart from the coolies, I seemed to be the only poor man in Saigon. The cafés were crowded, and there were queues for cinema seats at 7s. each. Expensive cars driven by Chinese hustled the local carts drawn by tiny ponies. Purveyors of refreshments and cold drinks plied a constant and lucrative trade. The local unit of currency, the piastre, valued officially at fourpence, seemed to be regarded in no higher esteem than our own modern penny.

In any side street I would be sure to see a group of men squatting on the pavement, playing some game of chance. Gambling is an Eastern disease.

"Oh, but we are mild," protested a Vietnamese acquaintance. "We only gamble for part of the day. You ought to look at the Chinese!"

### III

Over three hundred years ago a party of 3,000 Chinese appeared by boat off Saigon and demanded land. The local ruler judged it politic to appease them, and gave them an estate at Cholon, five miles away. They prospered, and sent for their friends and relations. Now Cholon has half a million inhabitants to Saigon's million. It is entirely Chinese, and it is rich. The Chinese have a genius for commerce—they are often called the Jews of the Pacific: they control a very large share of the trade of Vietnam—much larger than that of the French or even of the Vietnamese themselves.



A professor of Chinese undertook to show Cholon to me, and preferred to do so by night. I learned that the Chinese are a people apart: they are organized in five 'congregations', or groups, by language—Canton, Swatow, and two others, with a fifth congregation for the oddments. The leader of the clan represents it in all business with the government: the congregation pays its taxes (or avoids them) as a whole. It arranges for its own schools and welfare.

In Saigon most of the shops carry their signs in the Roman alphabet, used both by the French and the Vietnamese. In Cholon all are in Chinese ideographs: there is nothing to suggest that you are not in China.

We called at a theatre, where a traditional piece was being played. The professor was well known, and we went behind the scenes. Families were sleeping in any square yard of space while the players donned the fantastic make-up and magnificent costumes. After a chat with the leading lady I stood in the wings, opposite the orchestra. This had a full-time job, joining in apparently at will. The busiest man was the wielder of the cymbals, who acted as the emphasis.

"You are guilty!"

"No!!"

"Yes you are!!!"

"No I am not!!!!"

Each note of exclamation represented a clang of the cymbals.

Otherwise the action was stylized: a girl screwed herself up into a fixed position, and the audience understood that this meant, "I do hope that my baby is a boy."

"It had better be!" replied the man, by sticking out one leg and twisting his arms behind his neck.

The leading lady made her exit, but stood by me, chatting. We were in full view of the audience, but no one took any notice. We were not supposed to be there: therefore we did not exist.

The professor led me on to a 'Great World', reminiscent of others I had seen at Singapore. It appeared to be a gigantic fun-fair, but we were searched for arms as we entered. There were a few amusements of the dodg'em variety, and a large number of eating houses, but in the main the 'World' was a vast gambling den. Monte Carlo was trifling in comparison. There were hundreds of halls, featuring varieties of roulette,

each thronged with players. A man close by me, looking as if he needed a meal, lost 500 piastres in ten minutes. Others were plunging in much bigger sums: at any given moment tens of thousands of pounds must have been at issue.

"Yes," said the professor. "The company pays the government 700,000 piastres (£11,000) a day for the concession—and 300,000 piastres to the Viet Minh to leave it alone in peace!"

I don't know how he knew, but in the surroundings the statement did not appear fantastic. There was something strangely unreal about the scene, where rich men gambled for thrills and poor men risked their week's earnings.

Now I asked to see an opium den.

"You mean a salon of dis-intoxication," my friend corrected.

If there ever was any romance in opium smoking, which I doubt, it has now disappeared: the whole business is government controlled—an effective counter to romance! To smoke, you need a licence. First you must get a medical certificate to declare that you are an addict, and that it is necessary to break you of the habit gradually. Then you go to the nearest Customs and Excise office and buy a licence: I was assured that a little discreet bribery is necessary as well, for the clerk knows that you are desperate.

The opium poppy is grown in two districts of Laos, and the manufacture of the drug is a government monopoly—a remunerative one, I gathered: the opium costs 900 piastres a kilogram to make, and sells for 30,000 piastres—an adequate profit! It means much to the local peasants, for it is their only cash crop. They grow rice and maize for food, but need a few pounds a year for commodities like knives, clothes and salt. These are provided by the poppy crop.

The opium suffices for the 200 dens still in operation. I was taken to two examples, and found them strangely unexciting, and not at all like the book descriptions. The first was a low-grade resort for coolies, who can only afford the dregs, full of impurities and poisons, left over in the manufacture of the drug. Here two half-starved old men lay on dirty bunks: if their pipe dreams were pleasant, they showed no sign of delight.

There was an 'ordinary' grade of establishment, but I was next shown a house of a luxury type. Here, among half a dozen smokers, were two Europeans.



"I don't understand the fuss," said one. "It's just like a smoke and a whisky, but it lasts longer. If you're tired or worried—two chronic complaints in these parts—it will ease your mind and make you forget your troubles. It is like a mild mental anæsthetic—and quite harmless so long as you're reasonable."

"He may be right," commented the professor of Chinese, as we left. "The trouble is that so few people are reasonable!"

We went on to a night club. The clientèle was smartly dressed—the women especially so: and yet the country was supposed to be engaged in a bitter civil war. Here there was no sense of strain.

We joined a small party, which had engaged two Chinese 'taxi-girls' as dancing partners—graceful and dignified in their sheath dresses.

"Your partner has a lovely figure," I said to one of the men.

"Yes, but her breasts are fake," he commented. "I could feel that as I danced with her—some girls don't like to be flat-chested. You can buy rubber breasts, you know, for evening wear. That's the worst of this country—nearly everything is phony!"

#### IV

At Saigon I now began a series of conversations, preparatory to my journey about the country. I talked with many cabinet ministers and with ordinary people. I found myself searching for the answers to a series of questions.

What was the meaning of Saigon itself—a strange liaison between France and the Orient? Was it only transient, or was it a permanent meeting of East and West?

And why was it so calm? Vietnam was disrupted by war: even the delta outside the city was unsafe for night travel. This was April 1953, and the Communist invasion of Laos was too obviously imminent. Yet the war was seldom mentioned—I passed an hour with a cabinet minister and deliberately never introduced the issue: nor did he.

And yet it was a deadly and a beastly war. At one dinner my partner was the eldest daughter of the Prime Minister. Two of her brothers had been murdered by the Viet Minh under

revolting circumstances, and now her husband was their prisoner. Yet her calm sadness seemed almost foreign to the atmosphere about me.

Among the French were signs of cynicism and disillusion. To some the situation spelled tragedy: others sought only to save what they could from the wreck—or to forget it. While some toiled feverishly, others gossiped frivolously.

Many government offices were completely staffed by Vietnamese: in others a single Frenchman remained as an observer. Did this mean that French rule in Indo-China was at an end? Was Vietnam really an independent state?

And the economic picture—the signs of luxury in Saigon could not be reconciled with the dreadful realities of a hard and dragging war. I knew that Indo-China was just one of the battlefields between Democracy and Communism. Yet what—how—why—

I very quickly saw that I should get no real answers in Saigon, so I went out to look for them, and here I record my experiences. I ask readers not to skip the next two chapters: compared with the others they are heavy going, but they are vital to the understanding of the Indo-Chinese problem—and this in itself is vital to the peace of the world.



## CHAPTER TWO

### END AND BEGINNING

#### I

IT is only little more than a hundred years ago since their neighbours admitted that the Moïs were human beings, complete with souls. A French sea captain visiting Annam in 1819 was assured by the rulers of the country that there were 'wild men' in the interior, with tails: they looked like men, and could speak some incomprehensible jargon, but were regarded as an advanced species of apes. Stimulated by such reports, Western circus proprietors and zoological directors strove to obtain specimens of these 'missing links' for their collections.

Yet the Moïs are by no means the oldest inhabitants of the Indo-Chinese lands. There are innumerable traces of the lairs of prehistoric man—the region lies between Peking and Java, scenes of some of the most important palæolithic—and even pre-palæolithic discoveries. Certainly this land of rich soil, ample rain and strong sun, where plants will grow with the minimum of attention, has been occupied from very early times.

The known ethnic history of Indo-China is akin to that of Western Europe. Tribes settled on the fertile regions: other tribes, out-populating the resources of their own fields or hunting-grounds, raided in search of new lands. The original tribes were pushed farther and farther from the centres of population—the junction of Asia and Europe: the newcomers in their turn shared their fate as fresh predatory waves of invaders arrived. In Europe centuries of pressure forced the oldest people, such as the Basques and the Celts, to the extreme limits of the Continent: in Asia the constant expansion of the Chinese masses sent emigrants, or warriors, or both, in search of new pastures. The luscious fields of what is now Indo-China were an irresistible attraction.

Hence to-day most of the people of Annam are of distant

Chinese origin or admixture. (We shall glance at Cambodia and Laos later.) Yet mingled with the Annamese are people of a hundred tribes: some, like the Moïs, number nearly a million: others precariously maintain only a few villages with two or three thousand people. Each of these tribes may in turn have been the dominant population of the region—but no one knows the order of their rise or decline. Probably most of them originated in south-eastern China. This does not mean that they were Chinese, save by the widest interpretation of the term. For centuries the word China denoted not a race, but an empire and a civilization, both imposed upon many subject peoples.

It is not unusual for the expansion of an empire to follow the trail of its refugees. A Chinese conqueror overran Indo-China in 208 B.C., holding it from the emperor as an autonomous fief. In 111 B.C., however, it was formally annexed by China.

This is not the local explanation of the origin of the country. As might be expected in a land where ancestors and spirits dominate, the legend is more fanciful. About 2000 B.C. a prince named Lac-Long-Quan, a scion of the Hong-Bang dynasty, married a fairy named Au-Co. This alliance produced even weirder results than that outlined by Gilbert in *Iolanthe*. Instead of producing children, the fairy laid a hundred eggs! All of these hatched out sons.

Fifty of them followed their mother northwards over the mountains: the father, with the rest, went south along the coast road. (The legend does not mention a quarrel or divorce, but a prince could legitimately regard with suspicion a wife so genetically unconventional.) This paternal group settled in what is now the delta of the Red River, and established the first Vietnam kingdom. This was the one eventually conquered by the Chinese, whose domination was to last for a thousand years. They called the conquered region An-Nam, the peaceful or pacified South.

Yet it was *not* peaceful. A dozen times the local people revolted, to be crushed by the superior forces of the Chinese. One rising, in A.D. 40, was led by two sisters, Trung-Trac and Trung-Nhi, the Vietnam Joans of Arc. They drove out the Chinese governor, and for two years maintained a precarious independence. Joan is officially venerated as a saint, but the Trung sisters are worshipped as gods.



Not until A.D. 939 was a rebellion successful. Then a local governor, Ngo-Quyen, actually defeated the Chinese in battle and established his own dynasty. Others followed—six in the next thousand years. An Oriental version of the feudal system was introduced, with interminable quarrels between the powerful lords—one of whom would on occasion make himself king.

Yet there were periods of progress. The Lês dynasty, from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, was amazingly modern in its outlook: it organized elections for a national assembly—and even recruited its civil servants by competitive examination! This idea, however, was borrowed from neighbouring China.

The following dynasty, of the Tran family, was more at home on the battlefield. One of them even put to flight an army of half a million of Kublai Khan's Mongolian hordes, which had terrorized Asia and Europe. A succession of warrior kings extended the frontiers of the land, and brought neighbouring princes under subjection.

In the fifteenth century the Chinese made a belated attempt to recover their lost outpost of empire—assisted by internecine war within Annam. The Chinese were driven out once more, but the local feuds continued, culminating in a remarkable parallel to the English Wars of the Roses. From this a powerful family named Nguyen emerged victorious, and in 1802 one of its members became Emperor of Annam under the title of Gia-Long.

Now we are approaching our own times, for Gia-Long was the direct ancestor of the present emperor, Bao Dai.

## II

Gia-Long was, for his times, an enlightened monarch. He established a centralized régime covering the three provinces of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China: each sent representatives to his Council. There was no pretence at democracy, at that time unknown in Asia: the councillors were drawn from the ruling classes or scholarly mandarins: but they did succeed in developing the power and prosperity of their country.

The next emperor, Minh-Mang, carried on some of the good work. He was a noted jurist, and began to evolve some kind of



order from the multiplicity of local usages which prevailed in the many and varied tribal areas of his kingdom. It was he, too, who built the 'mandarin roads', which are still an important part of Vietnam communications: their original purpose was to facilitate the passage of the royal administrators to different parts of the realm. He was, however, very anti-foreign—a dominating feature of most Asiatic monarchs—and some of the excesses of his reign were to have important consequences.

Nevertheless, imperial authority over the outlying tribes was always loose, and too often local lords—or village headmen—defied the emperor and resorted to banditry. This lack of control was to have dramatic results.

From the sixteenth century European traders had established contact with Annam. Spanish and Portuguese missionaries followed their traders; later, French clergy in India heard of the new field of endeavour, and in 1787 Pigneau de Behaine, Bishop of Adran, negotiated a treaty between the ruler of Cochin China and the French king. The bishop thought of spiritual penetration, but other Frenchmen held different ideas. The Revolution postponed direct action, but a number of French officers assisted Gia-Long in his bid for the throne. Naturally, his success increased their influence.

His successors also revealed the traditional anti-foreign attitude. French missionaries and local converts were murdered by the turbulent tribesmen. This gave the French an excuse for practical intervention. (There were not lacking those who claimed that the missionaries had been sent deliberately to invite so convenient a martyrdom!) It began in 1858, and by 1862 part of Cochin China had been detached from the emperor's domains to become a French colony.

Once started, such a process could not be halted. The French were aided by the accident of a succession of weak monarchs: in a land of diverse races and tribes, where authority depended largely upon the personality of the ruler, this involved internecine divisions and local chaos. A French officer with an army of only 188 men became master of the Tonkin delta. So the infiltration continued, on the usual colonial pattern. One Annamese emperor appealed to his 'cousin', the Emperor of China, but a small French force beat the armies of both countries with ridiculous ease, so superior were its weapons. By

1884 the French were masters of Indo-China. Tonkin and Annam became protectorates, with Cochin China still a directly ruled colony. Later, protectorates were established over the neighbouring countries of Cambodia and Laos, each of which had its own king.

While local administration and laws prevailed as hitherto, the real power was in French hands—the succession of emperors were little more than puppets under the control of the French Resident-General.

There was constant trouble on the Chinese border, and occasional outbreaks of banditry in Annam. Generally, however, the outlook was too local for effective resistance—and the emperors had accepted French tutelage. Further, the French gradually imposed a state of law and order such as the country had seldom if ever enjoyed, an efficient administration, and a new economic system. Though this was primarily designed to benefit French commerce, it did have considerable beneficial effects in Indo-China. In these days colonialism is not fashionable, and in older days it was often hypocritical, but the fact remains that many colonial powers did directly or indirectly stimulate real progress in their territories. Many lands which to-day enjoy a progressive existence would still be a chaos of barbarism but for the years of colonial tutelage. Fashionable or not, we shall have to refer to this fact more than once. Peace in itself is no mean gift to a troubled land, even if it is imposed rather than evoked. As conditions became more settled, the French even began very modest experiments in admitting local men into their councils. But they were to find, as others have done before and since, that in colonialism there is neither finality nor gratitude.

### III

Save for sporadic outbursts attributable at least as much to banditry as to patriotism, the French occupation had been accepted almost mildly. True, save in Cochin China it worked through local rulers—Frenchmen were ‘advisers’ rather than direct autocrats. Most Eastern races have their own modes of logic, and power is recognized at its own worth: certainly a



small Asiatic country could not hope to prevail against French might. Further, there were Annamese intellectuals who recognized the quality of French culture, so much higher than the decadent Chinese civilization. And with the French came the wonders of modern science and invention: these persuaded some local people that intimate contact with the West could bring great benefits to their country. This did not mean that their local patriotism was destroyed: it was submerged—or, in some cases, incorporated into the new system.

The Annamese masses were nearly always local in outlook—the minority tribes especially so: they seldom looked beyond their immediate ruler, and it mattered little to them if he now did as a Frenchman ordered—indeed, very often they benefited considerably by this. Among the intellectuals it was different—and, like China, Annam was always well supplied with clever men: they always included some who loathed the idea of foreign rule—especially of European rule. 'Asia for the Asiatics' was a slogan popularized, but not invented, by the Japanese.

Yet it was the Japanese who again made Annamese nationalism a living issue. The defeat of Russia in 1905 had profound psychological effects on the Far Eastern peoples: it revealed that European powers were *not* invincible. Annamese students (the term includes people from all three provinces now called Vietnam) went to Japan to study the secrets of the Japanese successes. There they founded a 'Society for the Modernization of Annam'. Some returned to organize subversive activities, encouraged by the Chinese Revolution—at one time Sun Yat Sen operated from Hanoi. There were minor outbreaks of violence, easily suppressed, and with little or no popular support.

However, the first World War brought prosperity to the country—and prosperity can be an effective damper to revolutionary ardour. The products of Indo-China were in demand, and the standard of living rose. The Allied victory heightened the French prestige, and many of the administrators prepared for a long spell of progressive reforms.

But new ideas were stirring. Nationalist or revolutionary movements—and often the two are combined—usually have their origin in intellectual circles, but they seldom achieve results



until they have attracted some form of mass support. The very fact of economic progress led the intellectuals to envisage far greater possibilities, and now they were not alone. Thousands of Annamese had served in France as soldiers or workers, and had seen something of the French standard of life. There had been little comment on the standards enjoyed by French officials in Indo-China—it was the accepted practice for rulers to live far better than the people they ruled. But now an Annamese labourer discovered that his French equivalent lived incomparably better than he had ever envisaged. The greatest enemy of colonialism is comparison: few 'natives' grumble until they see people better off than themselves.

The new spirit was fostered by French success. Every advance of social conditions—especially of education—led to a growing appreciation of the stigma of colonial status. Ideas became very confused. The people who had made the comparisons had no idea how to attain French standards, and the intellectuals who read Rousseau and Marx were steeped in theory, and knew nothing of its practical application to local problems.

There is no limit to the disruptive effects of war. At a moment when a bold progressive policy in Indo-China was needed, the French were involved in much more important and urgent problems nearer home. The tendency in the colonial empire was therefore to carry on as before: but now the atmosphere had changed, and the most benevolent intentions could not conceal the fact that the French were the rulers of Indo-China, and that although the local people had benefited economically, France had probably benefited even more. Few of the French leaders appreciated that the post-war situation bore little relation to the modest nationalism which had shown itself spasmodically before 1914.

In 1925 the 'Revolutionary Party of Young Annam' was founded—its leaders had long been active Nationalists at home or abroad. Soon it was subject to the cleavages inherent in such organizations: in particular, two leading factions respectively favoured Nationalist and Communist trends. The latter section was led by an Annamese named Nguyen-Ai-Quoc.

At this stage the French exhibited their ignorance of the real situation. The demands of the Nationalists were modest—a gradual increase in local rights and responsibilities—especially

a greater share of the administrative posts, held almost exclusively by the French. But the French would not listen to them. Hence, almost automatically, the leadership passed to the more aggressive and disruptive Communist faction.

Again the French were misled. In 1930 a series of mutinies among local troops was drastically repressed, and military commanders believed that the 'situation was in hand'. It seldom is.

The French colonial system at that time was highly centralized: power was concentrated not in Saigon but in Paris. Educated Annamese who aspired to the public service found that the best administrative posts went to Frenchmen: business men believed that their country was being exploited to French advantage: and such small portion of the proletariat as was interested now heard Communist arguments in a Nationalist setting.

In the late nineteen-thirties the French made some concessions to the rising national feeling: they were too few, too little, and too late. In 1939 there was formed an organization with a cumbersome title—Viet-Nam-Dộc-Lập-Dông-Minh-Hoi, or League for Viet Nam Independence: it was colloquially and mercifully abbreviated to Viet Minh.

It was at least nominally a Nationalist faction, but some of its leaders were Communists—the principal was that Nguyen-Ai-Quoc who had been active earlier. This was only one of the aliases he used. Soon he adopted the pseudonym by which he is known to-day—Ho Chi Minh.

## IV

The situation at the outbreak of war in 1939 was therefore very uneasy. The Nationalist movement was gathering force, and its most important organization was virtually under Communist leadership—and the French did not realize the strength of either! Their nonchalance or optimism nearly led to disaster. Even at this stage moderate concessions would have been accepted by most of the Nationalists—few of whom were Communists, and most of whom were aware of the practical achievements of the French régime. But the war gave a conventional



excuse for doing nothing—a policy too often gratefully accepted by politicians and officials.

The collapse of France in 1940 emphasized the isolation of Indo-China. The garrison numbered only 13,000 troops, and no reinforcement was possible. Almost before the ink was dry on Hitler's dictated armistice treaty, the Japanese demanded the closing of the frontier between Indo-China and China.

The French Resident, General Catroux, made enquiries of U.S.A. and Britain. Neither wished to extend the war to the Far East, and admitted that the French had no alternative. It will be recalled that about the same time Britain had to submit to Japanese pressure to close the Burma Road.

The closing of the frontier was naturally only the beginning. The next demand was for Japanese bases in Tonkin: others were added later.

However, the Japanese left the country under French administration. For the moment, at least, they were not interested in its sovereignty—they used it only as the base for their attacks on Malaya and Siam. The country was quiet. Much later Viet Minh claimed to have fought against the Japanese forces, but neither Japanese nor French records or memories have any trace of such actions. The principal Viet Minh activity at the time was in propaganda and in eliminating such of their own people as might prove serious opponents.

By March 1945, the situation had completely changed: the Japanese now faced the serious likelihood of defeat. The Vichy government had crashed with the liberation of France, and the authorities in Indo-China reacted to the stimulus of victory. The Japanese, anticipating an Allied landing, decided to suppress the French rule.

French officials and troops were interned. The Japanese persuaded the Emperor Bao Dai to declare the independence of Vietnam. This was a typical Japanese move—to sow confusion among the Allies by delegating power to Nationalist movements. In particular it was designed to alienate U.S.A. from France, for the American dislike of colonialism, even if somewhat antiquated, was proverbial.

Viet Minh refused to accept Bao Dai's proclamation. It had established itself in northern Tonkin, which had not been occupied by the Japanese, and in the last weeks of the war



carried out a few spectacular if minor raids. But the situation was obviously only temporary: the doom of Japan was now certain, and she surrendered in August 1945.

Admittedly in wartime it is seldom easy to look ahead: but the Indo-China episode shows too many examples of political ineptitude to be reassuring. For some reason the Allies had refused to allow Free French forces to fight in the Pacific zone. Hence, at the moment of victory, there were no French troops available.

However, the Allies had foreseen that. The Potsdam Conference planned the re-occupation of Indo-China by the British as far as the 16th parallel, by the Chinese to the north—the latter at American suggestion, as a sop to the pride of Chiang Kai-shek. (Earlier, President Roosevelt—who was opposed to the return of the French—had suggested the occupation of the whole of Indo-China by the Chinese: had the British not protested, this would have meant that to-day the whole of South-East Asia would have been under Communist control.) But when the British forces arrived in September to disarm the Japanese, they found that much had happened in the month since the Jap surrender. The French were still interned, and Ho Chi Minh had proclaimed Viet Nam as an independent republic.

### CHAPTER THREE

## WAR COMES TO VIETNAM

#### I

As so often in the East, or for that matter anywhere, the career of the Viet Minh is full of contradictions. It was originally formed in Nationalist China: its first chance to control the northern province of Tonkin was the gift of Chiang Kai-shek. True, at this time Viet Minh emphasized Nationalism rather than Communism—it was a wide organization which did in fact include two Nationalist factions. These were absorbed or eliminated later.

The Chinese held the key to the situation. Up to the 16th parallel the British disarmed the Japanese and then withdrew, handing over to the French. The Chinese, however, clung tightly to the northern territory. Not until they had looted it to a degree remarkable even in the East were they prepared to consider evacuation: at last the French bribed them out.

By this time, however, the Viet Minh leaders had done much to consolidate their position. At the moment of the Japanese surrender the puppet government of the Emperor Bao Dai had collapsed. Viet Minh, as the only organized body, expanded into the political vacuum, and proclaimed an independent Vietnam—in order to give the appearance of a nation-wide movement, Bao Dai was given the title of Counsellor to the new government! The British occupation of the south abruptly checked Viet Minh ambitions there, but the corruption and ineptitude of the Chinese occupiers of the north enabled Ho Chi Minh to establish an irregular authority. He bought American arms from venal Chinese commanders: he bribed their colleagues to hand over arms taken from the defeated Japanese. He even held elections, on a pattern very familiar in Europe. His associated Nationalist parties were allocated a minority of seats, and the electorate duly voted at least 98 per cent in favour of the single



lists. Nevertheless, there were signs of tension as Nationalist leaders gradually perceived that they were being subordinated to ideological interests. In February 1946, indeed, Ho Chi Minh was so alarmed that he offered to replace the Emperor Bao Dai on his throne! The Emperor refused.

In the same month the Chinese at last agreed to evacuate northern Vietnam, and a French fleet appeared off Haiphong. Ho Chi Minh now had to fight or negotiate: he chose negotiation. On March 6th, 1946, a convention was signed: the French government recognized Vietnam as a free state within the French Union: and Vietnam would receive the French troops as friends when they relieved the Chinese. But it was soon clear that Viet Minh regarded this as merely a temporary 'agreement'. Riots and murders of French residents continued, and Viet Minh leaders made inflammatory speeches. The French forces maintained an admirable restraint—some would call it weakness, but events in other parts of Asia had already shown the danger of the traditional colonial policies. This was best appreciated by the men on the spot: in Paris there were too many politicians who regarded the war as a temporary interlude instead of a revolution.

They were represented in Indo-China by a governor-general of the extreme right, Admiral d'Argenlieu. He called a conference at Dalat, but insisted that as Cochinchina was a French possession, and not a mere protectorate, its future could not be discussed with that of Annam and Tonkin. As its population is overwhelmingly Vietnamese, and as its rice is essential to the economic life of a Vietnam state, the Viet Minh leaders protested vigorously. But Admiral d'Argenlieu continued cheerfully along his retrogressive path: he declared Cochinchina an independent republic within the French Union, and appointed a provisional government!

Thus, when the French government convened a further conference at Fontainebleau, even the more moderate Viet Minh leaders were suspicious and disillusioned.

Liberty cannot be constrained. The French offered a still wider degree of local self-government—which inevitably prompted Ho Chi Minh to ask for more. The negotiations failed, but to avoid a complete breakdown a temporary *modus vivendi* was agreed: it gave power in the economic and local



government field to the Indo-Chinese states, but the French influence was still dominant. Viet Minh demands were explicit: they wanted a position akin to that of Eire *vis-à-vis* Britain, enjoying any advantages of a French connection with none of its responsibilities.

An uneasy period followed. In the south the French supported a Cochinchina republic which had little popular backing—but which was vociferously attacked by Ho Chi Minh as a rival to his own. In the north his power was more secure. The hold he had seized on the collapse of Japan, and consolidated during the Chinese occupation, could be broken only by military operations. His methods were revealed as totalitarian, involving a strong police force and the elimination of potential opponents. He took over the Nationalist slogans of the disrupted parties, and continued a violent anti-French campaign. Apparently there were French who believed that it was still possible to work out an agreement—at this time the Communist technique of gradual domination was not quite as clear as it is to-day.

On November 20th, 1946, a French Commission investigating war graves was attacked: on the same day a French customs launch which had arrested a Chinese launch for smuggling was fired on. Then, on December 19th, the Viet Minh organized a rising at Hanoi: French men, women and children were slaughtered under conditions of sheer savagery. Captured orders showed that the move had been long prepared—and that it was anti-foreign rather than merely anti-French. The fiercest vengeance was to be wreaked on those who had collaborated with the French—or the victims of collaboration. All Eurasians—men, women and children—were to be killed on the spot: all Annamese women married to Frenchmen or living with them as concubines were to be disembowelled.

This attack was the turning point of the struggle. Whatever had been the hopes of peaceful settlement, once open war had virtually been declared their prospects were poor indeed.

## II

Looking back, and appreciating the character of Communist

negotiations and ambitions, we find it strange that the French could ever have hoped to achieve a peaceful settlement. The career of the Viet Minh leader should have been warning enough.

He was born in northern Annam in 1894; his name was Nguyen Tat Than—we have met him later as Nguyen-Ai-Quoc. Later he adopted his present pseudonym of Ho Chi Minh—'He Who Shines'.

At the age of eighteen he went to sea, visiting America and England. In 1919 he settled in Paris, earning a living as a photographer: it was at this time, apparently, that he became a Communist, for in 1920 he attended the party congress at Tours as the Indo-Chinese delegate. He wrote copiously for the Communist press, and in 1923 went to Russia, where he served for nearly three years as a member of the International Communist Peasants' Presidium. Then he was sent to China as a Russian agent, and subsequently to Siam, where he organized an Annamese Communist faction—which was directly affiliated to the Comintern. Then he worked under Russian orders until the collapse of Japan gave him the chance he had long anticipated.

One would have thought that a record like this would have warned the French that they were dealing not with an Annamese Nationalist, but with a Communist Revolutionary. They do not seem to have recognized this: during his negotiations at Fontainebleau he was treated with high honour as a national leader: he was often compared with Aung San in Burma. Maybe the French made the mistake of regarding Ho Chi Minh as the *only* Vietnam leader. This was incorrect: he had the best organized and most numerous party, and his Nationalist sentiments evoked a wide response, but there were others who could have rallied the people—Viet Minh had not yet succeeded in liquidating all the Vietnam nationalists.

The French had undoubtedly been misled by the Viet Minh collaboration with the Chinese Nationalists. At the time this was Stalin's policy: it was only when Moscow reversed this, and openly supported the Chinese Communists, that Ho Chi Minh obediently declared open defiance of the French. Henceforward the 'Democratic Government of the Vietnamese Republic' was to be supreme. There were some desultory peace



moves, determined largely by the current situation. In April 1947, Ho Chi Minh suggested a renewal of negotiations, but when the French demanded the return of 'hostages' as a sign of good faith, he refused. Then, in September, the French themselves suggested further negotiations—but got no reply whatever.

Even after the treacherous attacks had begun, some French politicians still thought in conventional terms of a 'round table conference', with mutual confidence. Local people were quicker to recognize the real situation. Such remnants of the old Nationalist parties as had escaped Viet Minh 'purges' gradually regrouped. They saw the folly of their earlier disunities, which had enabled their determined enemy to attack them piecemeal: many recognized that a democratic independence could now only be attained with the French support. As a leader who might best unite the different factions, they turned to the ex-Emperor Bao Dai—who had early appreciated the farcical nature of his appointment as 'Counsellor' to the Viet Minh government, and was now living in exile.

He entered into conversations with the French—and proved himself a skilled and tenacious negotiator. The terms he secured from the French were far more liberal than those previously offered to Ho Chi Minh. It is indeed interesting to consider what the latter would have done had the French offered him such conditions: either he must have accepted them, or else he would have revealed openly that his Nationalism was merely a cloak for his Communist activities.

The final agreement was not signed until March 8th, 1949. France formally surrendered her rights in the colony of Cochin China: henceforward Vietnam was a united country, with the three provinces of Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China. Vietnam was to be completely independent within the French Union, on whose Council it would be represented, and which would hold a watching brief over foreign policy. Internally Vietnamese power was supreme: it was to control its own army, justice, education and economy—the latter qualified only by the necessity of general agreement with Laos and Cambodia, the other partners in a new Indo-Chinese Federation. The French reserved the right to hold mixed courts for cases in which their nationals were concerned, but in general most Nationalist aspirations were

satisfied. A subsequent conference at Pau worked out practical methods of handing over control of posts, communications, economy, social and medical services, and other aspects of national sovereignty. A provisional government was set up—elections could scarcely be held until peace had been restored.

The agreement was of tremendous importance. I heard some complaints—that the French should much earlier have given out-and-out independence, as the British did to India. True, had this been done, the atmosphere would have been much brighter. Liberty, once granted, cannot be restricted. There were Frenchmen who even at the last minute strove to retain special privileges for their country. Yet, were Vietnam not ravaged by war, these could prove no more than fantasies. If Britain had allocated to India 'self-government within the British Commonwealth', nothing could have stopped Indian aspirations to complete independence had they so desired. The analogy applies to Vietnam. At present the scene is clouded by war, to which the French contribution is essential. But when the war is over, there can never be any question of holding Vietnam within the French Union by force: if the country desires its own path, it will take it. Further associations will depend not on authority but upon common interests and common sense.

This is all so obvious that it reveals the hollowness of the present Viet Minh façade of Nationalism. If the independence of Vietnam is the real objective, it could be obtained without the firing of another shot.

### III

The reactionary Admiral d'Argenlieu was recalled, and a civilian High Commissioner appointed. The Emperor Bao Dai returned to his country, and a national government was established—it was hoped to attract the genuine Nationalists away from the Viet Minh fold, and some early successes were reported. But most people, confused, preferred to wait and see.

It is one thing to make an agreement, another to implement it, and yet another to create the confidence which will make it



work. The first two conditions were fulfilled, and the French and Vietnam governments observed them loyally: the third is much more difficult, and even now is far from complete.

The war with Viet Minh is the delaying factor. To the ordinary person the situation is not much changed: true, Vietnamese governors and officials have replaced French—but there are still French troops on every hand, and they signify authority. The division of the country makes a national organization impossible, and Vietnamese politicians are deprived of opportunities to make themselves known to more than a minority of their people. And all the time the Viet Minh propaganda against the French 'imperialists' pours out ceaselessly, and represents the Vietnam government as a puppet régime.

The inheritance of this was disputed from the first. In Cochin China<sup>1</sup> it exercised a loose authority, but so many districts were controlled or terrorized by Viet Minh that ordinary administration and commerce were quite impossible. Even today, when considerable strides towards stabilization have been made, movement by night is severely restricted: thus a few thousand determined men, if they are energetic and devoid of scruples, can impose their will on millions.

Annam was divided: the centre and south were for the government, the north and the mountainous backbone under Viet Minh rule. The key to the situation lay in the north, where its power had been most firmly established. Tonkin consists of the Red River delta and a mountain hinterland. The latter is extensive, but the delta gives economic life to the province. It did not need an astute tactician like Ho Chi Minh to appreciate that his fate might easily depend upon possession of the delta.

He therefore took advantage of the confusion resulting from long negotiations and from periods when no man knew where he stood. He was aided by French policy: the government in Paris viewed the situation with alarm. The European war ended, it was anxious to rebuild its shattered prestige near home, and not to squander its meagre resources in colonial enterprises. Yet Indo-China must be held—if only for considerations of prestige. Thus the French generals were given a hopeless task:

<sup>1</sup> Tonkin, Annam and Cochin China are now known as North, Central and South Vietnam.

they were to hold their ground with very small forces—and on no account to incur heavy casualties.

Such instructions were manifestly absurd. The French army took purely defensive measures, occupying fortified positions, and thus passed the initiative to the very mobile and lightly armed Viet Minh forces—now well trained by Chinese Communist officers skilled in guerrilla warfare. Fort after fort fell to their encircling tactics. The French blundered hopelessly from one crisis to the next, with their soldiers carrying the burden of political inadequacy.

Then it became clear, even to Paris, that the position was becoming desperate. In war the greatest danger comes not from enemy strength, but from one's own weakness. Devoid of a firm lead, scarcely knowing why they were fighting, the French in Vietnam were losing heart. The northern delta was on the point of being lost, as Viet Minh ranged over it almost at will. In despair the French government turned to one of its outstanding soldiers, General de Lattre de Tassigny. He was powerful enough to make his own terms, and discarded the shackling restrictions which had crippled his predecessors. He brought not only strong reinforcements, but his own personality—and Frenchmen, above all, respond eagerly to the inspiration of confident leadership. The supine policy of defence was abandoned—posts were maintained, but mobile units were formed to harry Viet Minh raiders, and to carry the war into their own territory. De Lattre's achievements cannot be reckoned in terms only of local victories, but in those of the new spirit which he aroused. French control of the Red River delta was tightened: the Viet Minh were still active, but only by infiltration. Whereas they had moved openly along the road, now convoys of coolies had to smuggle the precious rice from the delta area by night, avoiding French patrols as well as defence posts.

Yet the cost was heavy. In five years the French have lost 32,565 killed: of their annual intake of officers, 24 per cent is absorbed by the Viet Minh war—45 per cent of the non-commissioned officers. The cost approaches 300 million pounds a year. This is a shocking drain on a country which has suffered so severely in two world wars.

Recently, however, two factors have tended to ameliorate the situation. At first American opinion was often against the



French, who were 'fighting a colonialist war against people striving for a legitimate independence'. As the character of Viet Minh became more apparent, and as the French gave to Vietnam approximately the same measure of independence as U.S.A. had given to the Philippines, the outlook changed. Some far-sighted American leaders may have realized how far their mistaken decision to put the now-discredited Chinese Nationalists into Indo-China was responsible for the French distress. Certainly the Communist attack in Korea was decisive. It showed, slowly but clearly, that the struggle of the French in Indo-China and of the British in Malaya was bound up with that of the Americans in Korea: for such reasons welcome American aid began to flow, relieving the heavy drain on French resources.

Then confidence began to return to the Vietnamese people. At first the government had been accepted almost with indifference: probably it was a French creation, as Viet Minh propaganda insisted: anyway, it was only another government, which might be gone by to-morrow. In the East it seldom appears so important to be on the right side as on the winning side, and the Viet Minh were by far the more active and the better showmen: *attentisme*, or the wait-and-see attitude, was the prevailing disease. But gradually the democratic forces became more impressive: Viet Minh incurred some sharp defeats. There might be something in this home-rule business after all, it appeared—Vietnamese were controlling many of their own affairs. And a Vietnamese army was being created, trained and armed.

This feature was especially effective. Local authorities took new heart and organized their own defence. The Vietnam army reached a strength of 200,000 men, and became a powerful factor in the situation.

Yet by this time the Viet Minh forces numbered at least 300,000, ranging from unwilling conscripts to fanatical Communist soldiers. In the north they still retained the initiative: if Ho Chi Minh had not reckoned on so determined an opposition, at least he had prophesied a ten years' war.

At the time of my arrival in Indo-China he had had nearly seven years of his war, without a sign that it was near its ending. The French-Vietnam forces were unable to strike a vital blow:

on the other hand, there seemed to be no likelihood of their defeat: Viet Minh can achieve victory only through a conquest of the Red River delta, which is at least improbable. Cochin China was more firmly under control, and the government was slowly asserting its authority. But nobody cared to look too far ahead.

"There is *no* solution," was an opinion frequently expressed.

"The problem will never be solved in Indo-China. It is merely part of the world struggle between democracy and Communism."



## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE GOVERNOR OF BEN TRÉ

#### I

"**Y**ou might as well begin with the best," said a friend in Saigon. "Then you won't be surprised when you come to the worst. Go to the province of Ben Tré. It has been cleared of Viet Minh for a couple of years, so has been able to get on."

He pointed out on the map the principal town: it lay about sixty miles south of Saigon. "I suppose there'll be an hotel of sorts there?" I asked.

"I doubt it, but just go to the governor and tell him who you are."

I doubted whether my fame would have spread to the far-flung corners of Vietnam, but doubtless there would prove to be accommodation of some kind.

Both rail and bus services were available: I do not despise these methods of transport, but they have one characteristic fault—they will not stop when I want to. Hence I was delighted when I found that I could borrow a car with a Vietnamese driver.

"We might start fairly early—five or six in the morning," I suggested.

"No. The road does not open until seven—there is a curfew until then. A patrol reconnoitres to ensure that there has been no mischief during the night, and after that the road is open until 7 p.m."

The region might be counted clear of Viet Minh, but precautions continued. Every mile or two was a brick watch-tower, its first ten feet heavily banked with earth, and its environs guarded by barbed wire and a fence of bamboo spikes. The sentries were in their vantage point, roofed like the belfry of a Burgundian church.

Then, periodically, we were halted at a police post. I do not

see how security benefited when a policeman asked us who we were and where we were going. Had we been Viet Minh, I doubted if we should have mentioned it.

At a check point I chanced on one of the examples of corruption I had discussed in Saigon. As the police moved from car to car, they invited the occupants to buy lottery tickets. Finding a European in the car, they waved the tickets only casually. But at other cars they were remarkably persistent.

"If you had not been here I should have had to buy one, or I should never have got on," said my driver. "And no one ever wins. Once a policeman sold me a ticket for a lottery which had already taken place. He said he must have got the wrong ones, but it made no difference."

For long spells the railway ran alongside the road—in places sharing the same bridge, thus producing long traffic delays. Each train seemed to be standardized: one coach was divided between first and second class, the next third class, with wooden seats, and the other fourth class, with wooden benches and plenty of standing or squatting room. This coach was always crowded, the others almost empty.

There was plenty of road traffic, hopelessly crowded. The men who pack the passengers into Moscow trams would rank as amateurs here. Some of the buses were modern: others had been ingeniously adapted from a variety of vehicles—even jeeps had been fitted with chassis to carry ten passengers: but most were ancient, and paid the penalty of age and overloading by frequent breakdowns. These were accepted philosophically by the passengers, and apparently without surprise by the drivers.

Lorries were equally misused. When one had been loaded with merchandise to its roof, there was still room for at least a dozen passengers, including two or three hanging on the back. I saw one which carried sixty or seventy pigs, in two layers, with a human cargo on top of them.

Mobile patrols raced up and down the road, but save for them and the watch-towers, the picture was one of peace. The plain of rice-fields was flat and featureless, save for occasional groves of palm trees. The fields were brown, for it was not yet the rainy season.

Hence the buffalo were taking a holiday. In a few weeks'



time they would be pulling wooden ploughs through a foot of mud and water.

"Is it true that buffalo don't like women?" I asked of a peasant.

"No. My wife often drives mine."

"But it is true that they don't like Europeans," I said, noticing that a large specimen was eyeing me with hostility. "I remember once in Burma——"

"Oh, yes. The buffalo has a very keen scent, and dislikes the smell of soap."

"But——"

"In Vietnam we do not use much soap—we prefer lots of water. But you use soap, and the buffalo does not like it. So—look out!"

I was already looking out, for the brute was moving menacingly towards me, his head lowered, and his great horns fearsome. My friend pushed him away: once I had regained the security of the car I promised to experiment—to abstain from the use of soap for a few days, and then test the theory by approaching a buffalo.

I could believe that it might be well founded. The buffalo *looks* as if he disliked soap. His colour is usually light brown, but this is not natural: he spends all his spare time wallowing in muddy pools, with only part of his head above water. But if you could ever persuade him to have a scrub-down, you would find that he was black or dark grey.

The hold-ups at the many bridges continued. Immediately a line of traffic came to a standstill, people appeared with something to sell—bread, fruit, coconuts, or highly coloured drinks.

We had passed through some villages and very small towns, but My Tho was obviously more important. Its market was busy and extensive: being at least a foot higher than the tallest local, I bumped my head frequently on the overhanging stalls. They were replete with goods—lengths of cotton and silk, ironmongery, and the like. Humbler merchants squatted on the ground, their wares about them—mostly food. The fish, muddy looking, had evidently been taken from the river, and their vendors allowed them to squirm in puddles while awaiting sale. Women offered rice, white or brown, and children eyed stalls with highly coloured biscuits and sweets. Every bargain



Village fort, Southern Vietnam



Delta village





The author talks to Viet Minh prisoners



On important occasions, consult the fortune teller

entailed long inspection and discussion. I was intrigued by a brown substance, not unlike very dry soap. A merchant kindly offered me a piece, and indicated that I should taste it—the local sugar, exceedingly sweet.

Now we took a ferry across the mile-wide Mekong. Masts and funnels of sunken ships showed pathetically above the surface of the water. Here was a French cruiser, which blew itself up rather than be captured by the Japanese: here were Jap vessels, caught by raiding American bombers.

On the south bank the scene changed rapidly. Instead of the dreary paddy fields were forests of coconut palms, fringed with banana trees. The confusion of greens was a delight to the eye, the palms anything but regimented in their growth.

"What a tree is the palm!" said a local man. "The most useful in the world. The whole of it is of use. We make the corner posts and roof supports of our houses from its trunk: its leaves, plaited, form our walls—or thatched, our roof: plaited again, our bed. The outer covering of its fruit gives us fibre for ropes: the hard shell is our best fuel, and the flesh of the nut is dried and sold as copra—it is full of oil, and makes fine soap. We can even use it for our lamps.

"And the coconut palm, given enough water, yields twelve crops a year!"

"You make me think of the slaughter-houses of Chicago," I said. "There they claim to use all the pig except the squeal."

"We would find some use for the squeal!" he chuckled.

## II

The governor of Ben Tré, Commandant Van-La, was awaiting me—my Saigon friend had after all taken the precaution to telephone ahead. He would be about forty, but as always in Vietnam looked younger: he was active and intelligent, and laughed like a merry boy at the end of each sentence. But I guessed that he could be very tough if the occasion demanded.

He assumed without question that I would stay with him—he had a huge house, he said, built for a French governor. Sure enough, he conducted me to a colonial mansion, and ushered me into the largest bedroom I ever saw.



It looked larger because the only furniture was a bed and a small dressing-table. He apologized for this—he had only taken over his post a few days earlier. But his hospitality was unbounded.

He wanted to consult me, he said. He had heard that I knew a great deal about war, and would not accept my modest disclaimers. Now, this was his problem: the province was virtually clear of Viet Minh. But in the extreme south-east of the province was a forest area, almost jungle. This sheltered a few dozen Viet Minh, maybe a hundred, who occasionally raided for loot. Once a force of 500 soldiers had combed the jungle, but had failed to discover a single enemy. Could I suggest anything?

Since the jungle would be too green to burn, and someone would write letters to the press if I suggested gas, my ideas were banal. Could he not surround the forest, and starve out the rebels?

No. Here was the map—unfortunately the forest skirted the river and sea—he would need a navy as well as an army. And desperate men can find food in the jungle, including wild birds and coconuts. Finally I suggested psychological warfare. If the Viet Minh were superstitious, as I suspected, why not fix loudspeakers in various parts of the forest and scare them by devils' noises night after night?

We lunched well on a pier on a little artificial lake. (I noticed that the prices were about one-quarter of those prevailing at Saigon.)

"This was the work of my predecessor, Colonel Leroy," he said. "You will hear a lot of him."

I did. I had already met him. Despite his name, he is a Vietnam, and a personality—which counts enormously in a country where democracy is still in its early stages. He was the son of a local landlord, and before the war had become a lieutenant in the French army. When, after recovering Saigon, the French began to move out into the provinces, Leroy acted as their guide. Thus he came back to his home town of Ben Tré.

There he stayed, while the French moved on. Borrowing twenty rifles, he armed some of the local Catholic peasants—and thus began what was the first of a whole series of private armies. It expanded, and he made his own war against the Viet

Minh—capturing arms from them to equip more forces. Soon he had cleared not only his own province, but the greater part of the adjoining territory as well.

Thus he became not only the local governor but military chief—and virtually independent of Saigon when it suited him to be. His outlook was paternal. His motto was: "My people have suffered a lot. They deserve happiness." He did not wait for government action—in any case the Vietnam government has very little money. He inspired the people to help themselves. Levying a *corvée*, or forced labour, of two days a month on all able-bodied people, he repaired the ravages of the war, built schools, a theatre, a cinema, a swimming-pool, and a children's park. He became almost legendary in his own province. And, it is worthy of note, he is a Christian. When I saw him in Saigon, he was about to leave for France on a training mission: I shall be surprised if we do not hear of him again.

This is one of the regions where French missionaries had their greatest successes, and about 50 per cent of the local people are Catholics. Every other village had its little church, and the clergy were nearly all Vietnamese.

I made a tour of some of Colonel Leroy's achievements, beginning in Ben Tré itself. First, a primary school, where Vietnam teachers faced classes of thirty to fifty pupils in simple classrooms: ages ranged from five to fourteen. The tuition was, of course, in Vietnamese, using the Roman alphabet—so much more practical than Chinese characters. The curriculum was standard—the three R's, history, geography and French. A system of examinations was favoured at all stages.

The handwriting of the pupils was neat, and their intelligence obvious. They had two advantages: a thirst for education which any Scot would have appreciated, and a phenomenal memory. This is usually a feature of a peasant population. Illiterate through the centuries, their knowledge and culture could be retained only in the head, and passed on verbally from one generation to the next. All the staff confirmed that the children's memories were extremely retentive.

Not far away was a primary school with French teachers, opened at Colonel Leroy's request. His purpose was clear: the Vietnamese language is local, and possibilities in its use end at the one university at Hanoi. But a man with a good grounding



of French has the knowledge of the world at his command. Hence this school was intended for children with ambitions. It has been such a success that its facilities are to be doubled.

Then on to the local secondary school, which was excellent. Here the staff was again Vietnamese—men and women—save for a French master who taught his language. The classes were mixed, and the standard of intelligence very high. In one room an English lesson was in progress. The written work was very good, but the pronunciation such that I did not at first recognize it as English. The master confessed that he had never spoken to an Englishman before, but had learned the language from a book which purported to give the correct pronunciation. He asked me to take over the class, and I spent an hour explaining the mysteries of English as it is spoken.

Later in the day as I sat in the pavilion by the lake, a group of five dignitaries waited upon me. Drinks appeared apparently without an order; then, at regular intervals, plates of monkey nuts and fried potatoes.

Conversation was general, but obviously they had something on their minds. It emerged in a burst, all five talking at once. It appeared that the headmaster of the secondary school had rushed round to see them after my lesson, and now they had come to offer me a post—for a few years, months or weeks, at my pleasure. Unfortunately I could not accept, but I made a note to try to get the British Council interested on my return. Vietnamese masters can teach their pupils to write good English, but half a dozen travelling English tutors could have a stimulating effect. It would not be necessary for them to know Vietnam—all secondary school pupils speak French.

The offer of a post is always flattering, but it had never previously fallen to my lot twice in one day.

I went to a camp where about five hundred Viet Minh prisoners of war were held. They were well treated, housed sixty to eighty in large huts, their beds the usual boards of the region—but with mosquito nets! They worked, and were paid for it—and had their own shop. Those off duty were playing table tennis, and others were tuning up musical instruments—they had formed a miniature orchestra.

"But the atmosphere is not that of a prison camp," I said to the officer in charge.

"I am glad to hear you say that," he remarked. "I myself was a prisoner of Viet Minh for a year. I was half-starved, ill-treated and beaten. So at the end I hated my captors all the more. So when I took this post, I discussed it with Colonel Leroy. We agreed that no blow should ever be struck: these people have been led astray—our task is to bring them back. I would like you to go round by yourself—in every group at least one is bound to speak French."

I did. The first man I met wore a cross on his chest.

"You are a Catholic?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes."

"Then what are you doing in this crowd?"

"I was afraid."

It was a simple story that he told: of Viet Minh invading the village, and offering a choice—service in their army, or death for themselves and their families.

"I did not fight," he said. "I allowed myself to be taken prisoner. I cannot understand how their armies exist."

They could not exist were all their soldiers like this man. But the core of the Viet Minh army is quite different, composed largely of fanatics. Further, even their terrorist methods of recruitment bring in a number of men who have never heard of Communism but who take naturally to banditry.

"Any complaints?" I echoed the old army cry to each group. The natural one was, "We want to go home." About living conditions there were none. Their food was the standard local rice and vegetable diet, with meat twice a week. Their wives and families could visit them on Sundays and Mondays. But "we are not beaten," was usually the first comment.

In one hut were about thirty women, who had acted as Viet Minh fifth columnists. Their task had been to spy out the land, and to persuade Vietnam soldiers to desert. They were even more anxious than the men to return home.

No one resembled less the beautiful women spies of fiction. None had any enthusiasm. Quite obviously I was not to find the secret of Viet Minh success here. If the camp held any enthusiasts, they successfully hid themselves. Most admitted themselves frankly as dupes.

They were subjected to propaganda courses to correct the



error of their ways. When the authorities were convinced that they were 'cured', they were released.

The propaganda consisted of photographs and talks—simple, but apparently effective. When I had completed my casual tour, the officer in charge asked if I would speak to them collectively.

"They have asked for it," he declared.

I preferred to take them a hut at a time: I spoke in French, so that those who understood would be able to confirm that the interpreter was not cheating. My theme was simple: that Viet Minh could not win, now that Vietnam was supported by U.S.A. and Britain as well as France: that the French were sincere, and the Nationalists could have all they wanted without laying the country in ruins: that, if Viet Minh won, their country would only be a puppet to the Chinese—who throughout history had scarcely been their best friends! That it was essential to finish the war quickly, so that Vietnam might make the progress it deserved: that a continuation of the war could only bring misery, and its vast damage would have to be paid for—by the people themselves.

It seemed to be effective, and the prisoners were neither afraid nor slow to ask questions.

The commanding officer was delighted. "If a Frenchman spoke, he would be suspect, of course. But an Englishman—why did we not think of it before? Viet Minh have always protested that we should have the same freedom as England gave to India. Now this is what I am going to do: I am going to telephone the government at Saigon, to tell them to engage you to tour all the prison camps and speak to the Viet Minh! What an effect it would have!"

I had to restrain his enthusiasm: yet the general idea was sound enough. An outsider could have a far greater effect upon these prisoners than a Vietnamese or a Frenchman: upon all save the fanatics, that is—no casual oratory would be likely to affect them.

### III

I did not pretend to understand the Viet Minh tactics in war. To capture a town and even to loot it—these things were almost





automatic in the region: to burn down a church—for the Catholics do not pretend to like Communism: but to burn down a hospital, which is not political but of service to all—that was incomprehensible.

When the French first intervened in Indo-China, they found only rudimentary medical services on the Chinese model—a mixture of intelligent wisdom and witch-doctoring. The handful of French doctors who accompanied the first force were a sensation. The Emperor Gia-Long promptly established a medical service in his palace at Hué, and his anti-foreign successor, Tu Duc, did not disdain French methods, and even founded a medical school.

The real organization did not begin until the conquest of Cochin China. The first hospital was built in 1862. The people largely responsible were the sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, an order with a long and beneficent reputation for nursing the poor—and still much engaged in Indo-China. Once begun, progress was rapid, and by 1905 Cochin China alone had seventy-two medical establishments.

Yet the greatest advances followed the researches of Pasteur. Institutes bearing his name were established at Saigon and Hanoi, and serious and successful attacks were made on the many plagues which scourged the country. Smallpox, cholera and pest were got well under control, and within twenty years the improvement in health conditions was remarkable. It is perhaps best expressed in population figures—16 million in 1901, and 28 million in 1951.

In 1902 a medical school was established at Hanoi. The French trained local men not only as doctors, but as auxiliaries, for work in the villages. A health service was organized on the model which still serves.

Every village of any size has its medical post, supervised by a trained orderly. He can not only deal with first-aid cases: he can recognize and prescribe for common ailments, and has a stock of the appropriate medicaments. The more serious cases he sends on to the hospital in the nearest town. I say 'he', but some of the auxiliaries are women. Later I visited the training school at Ben Tré, where about one-third of the students were girls.

They were of secondary educational standard, and their six

months' course covered an enormous amount of ground, from the practical bandaging of wounds to the recognition of diseases. Most of the text books were French, but some of the elementary ones were in Vietnamese. I was interested in a series of charts which illustrated the symptoms of the common diseases by coloured pictures.

By 1939 the organization covered the whole of Indo-China: it was especially effective in the more populated regions, where communications were good, and where a patient could easily be transported to hospital. Even by 1939 the figures showed a startling contrast to the primitive conditions of half a century earlier. There were 117 French doctors and 671 Vietnam. Consultations numbered 2,755,000, hospital patients 222,751, accouchements 84,584—13,859 hospital beds were available. Vaccinations and inoculations had reached a total of more than seven millions a year.

This, then, was the system which Vietnam inherited, and I went to see what they had made of it locally. The village medical posts were simple but effective—and obviously highly esteemed by the local people. I passed on to the general hospital at Ben Tré to be greeted by Dr. Dang van Cuong. Until a few weeks previously he had worked alone, but now had one assistant. There were two French sisters of St. Paul de Chartres: all the other nurses were Vietnam.

"But—" I began, as I stared at the mass of ruins within the hospital gates.

"Yes," he said. "That was one of the Viet Minh best efforts—to burn down the hospital. We have rebuilt two wards: another was given to us by the Americans, who have been very generous."

(This point deserves emphasis. Interested propaganda suggests that the American 'fascist-imperialists' give away only arms and munitions, to persuade people to fight: but, apart from the hospital ward and a large number of surgical instruments, I noticed that a fair proportion of the medicaments in the posts were American gifts. Another exceedingly useful benevolence was the provision of hundreds of pumps, so that villages could be assured of a constant supply of good water.)

"Viet Minh until two years ago held the neighbouring forest," Dr. Dang explained. "They made spasmodic attacks—more



than once bullets splattered against the walls while I was performing operations."

Certainly he did not lack experience: he was physician and surgeon for every kind of case. An amputation, an appendix, or a Caesarean section all came alike to him.

Accommodation was simple. The beds had no mattresses—"Our peasants would not know how to sleep on them!" Nor need the kitchen arrangements be complicated. But the proportion of cures was astonishingly high.

There was an affectionate atmosphere between doctor and patients which is not always encountered in our own organized schemes. But when I congratulated the jovial Dr. Dang he immediately became serious.

"It is understood that this is a Vietnamese hospital. But it was founded by the French—until they came we had nothing. To-day there are people who sneer at the proclaimed 'civilizing mission' of the French—but it is obvious that it was not all propaganda. I am a Vietnamese, and I believe in my country, but I recognize what the French have done. Not everyone in Vietnam does so, but you will find that in this province at least I am not alone."

#### IV

"This province is so quiet that you can go about almost anywhere at night," said the Governor, after dinner, with his usual laugh.

"Right. Then let us go."

"That's fair!" he shouted with laughter. "Come!"

So we drove around the countryside by a brilliant moonlight. The flat country now appeared very picturesque—the palmeries on the other side of the river especially so. By this time the small, flat-bottomed boats had ceased to ferry passengers across. Larger boats were tied up to wooden quays: they were loaded with bananas, and at first light would leave for My Tho, thence by rail to Saigon.

The Governor's boast was justified: it yielded fresh air and scenes of beauty, but no untoward incident.

Thus I had no qualms when the Governor proposed next morning that I should go out into the countryside. One of his

staff accompanied me—Lieutenant Vileo, a very serious and well-informed man.

We halted frequently at villages, and talked to the people. In a few weeks the rainy season would begin: then they would be very busy planting out the rice after ploughing in the muddy paddy fields. Already they were looking to the low mounds of earth, a foot or so high, which bounded their fields to enclose the water.

Ricefields are extraordinarily prolific and rewarding. Two crops a year are possible; nevertheless, these entail only four months' work in a year. Thus the peasant is virtually unemployed for two-thirds of the year.

Attempts have been made to solve this problem. One suggestion is the use of alternative crops, but the peasant is reluctant to give up to vegetables more than a small fraction of his land. Another is perhaps more promising: there is a movement afoot to teach artisan crafts to the peasant, so that he could occupy himself during slack periods.

He may need more work, but he is comparatively prosperous—there is a world market for his rice. I saw no signs of misery or even, by Eastern standards, of poverty. Yet the agrarian problem is universal, and not yet solved.

Now in my talks with Viet Minh prisoners of war, some had said that they were recruited by fear: others, however, admitted that they had been attracted by Viet Minh propaganda. I asked for details. They knew nothing of Communism, and had never heard of Karl Marx: nor were they especially interested in Nationalism. But the Viet Minh propagandists mentioned neither of these, but had preached a crusade of anti-Landlordism, a theme which arouses echoes in many lands.

I had discussed it in Saigon with the Minister of Agriculture. Although hundreds of thousands of peasants own their own farms, more rent it from big proprietors, usually on a share-cropping basis. These landlords are a comparatively modern innovation. They did not exist in older times, when the Emperor appointed learned mandarins as his officials—and confiscated their fortunes if they became too rich. Not until the coming of the French, with schemes for reclamation of the soil and for a great increase in output, did a landlord class evolve. Since then they have got to be rather *too* successful. I



shall describe later the official plan now attempting to solve the problem.

But the energetic Colonel Leroy did not wait for governments, which are notoriously slow to move. The general custom was for the landlord to take 40 to 50 per cent of the crop. But since expenses consumed up to 40 per cent of its value, the peasant was left with a mere 10 or 20 per cent.

So Colonel Leroy called together the landlords of his province. He pointed out that it was the iniquitous share-cropping system which acted as the best recruiting agent for Viet Minh: and he persuaded them to accept only 20 per cent of the crops as their share. There was plenty of opposition—one of the local landlords was a cabinet minister at Saigon! But Leroy was persistent, and won. This had immediate repercussions: it gave the peasant a reasonable prosperity, and confounded the Viet Minh propagandists.

"Have you tackled the problem of splitting up big estates in England?" the Governor asked, later.

"Yes."

"How?"

"By death duties."

"What are they?"

"Taxes on a man's estate, when he dies. Suppose a man owned 100,000 hectares of land; when he died his heir would have to pay a huge sum in death duties. So he would have to sell part of the land to get the money. Spread the process over a few generations, and you will see that there are not many big landlords left to-day."

"Ah! Revolution without Revolution!" he cried excitedly. "Now I understand what is meant by the English genius."

I have heard death duties called by very different names—especially by the landlords and their heirs. But it was obvious that I had put an idea into his head—for several minutes he even abstained from laughing. It may be that in the days to come the landlords of Vietnam will curse me: but in the long run they might discover that I had really done them a good turn.

I would not expect them to do this at once. They are among the most conservative of their kind: few of them live on their estates, so that they are out of contact with their peasants. By

definition they are not Communists, but firm supporters of the Vietnam government, which could hardly afford to quarrel with them at such a critical moment. But they could hold the fate of the country in their hands—and, unlike the wealthy merchants, they are Vietnamese, not Chinese. Had I been able to address them as I did the prisoners, I would again have chosen a very simple theme—that is it more profitable to retain 20 per cent than to lose all.

## v

Vileo took me out beyond Giong Trom to a series of villages. Most of them had suffered in the past from Viet Minh occupation or raids. "Oh, yes, we could afford bigger and better houses. But our homes were all destroyed—and if the Viet Minh came back they would destroy everything again." So prosperous people made do with a simple shack provided by the generous palm tree.

There were occasional watch-towers by the roadside, but these were not guarded by French and Vietnam regular soldiers, like those farther north. Instead, the local Home Guard assumed responsibility. Men were paid a small sum to garrison the towers by night: by day they could work in their own fields close by.

"Oh, nothing happens in the daytime now."

"And at night?"

"Nothing much, then. It must be six months since I fired my rifle."

Hence the events of the evening were no surprise. We had halted at the home of a village policeman. His living-room was rather congested: a large table, rather low, made of a very solid wood, and a wardrobe. I was not certain why a wardrobe should adorn a living-room, but it proved its worth—it was full of bottles, which were also full.

The man was a local sergeant, and had a squad of three.

"Four of you, for a village this size?" I queried.

"Ah, it is not our own people—they are easy enough. It is the Viet Minh."

"They raid?"



"They would do, if we were not here. They have to do something occasionally, if only to persuade people to pay protection money."

"But where do they come from?"

Here he was more hazy. He emphasized, however, that he organized a patrol around the outskirts of the village. I asked to go: there was no spare rifle for me, so I went as a non-combatant.

In a way it was not at all exciting, for we saw no sign of Viet Minh—or of anybody else, for by this time all sensible men were at home. But there were thrills of another kind, as we plunged into the palm forests. Nature had provided plenty of natural hazards, and I fell over most of them. However, the forest was clean: when I fell in the ricefields the smell of the mud I carried was enough to scare away the Viet Minh.

We returned to the village, and the sergeant duly made out a 'Nil' report. Then it appeared that the low table was a divan, and was to be my bed for the night. The doctor had said that his patients could not sleep on mattresses: I found it difficult to sleep on this divan: I never knew that wood could be so hard.

The Governor of Ben Tré laughed loud and long when I told him the following morning, and for once I felt that he had something to laugh about.

I gave Vileo a lift into Saigon. I noticed that when we approached the police post where lottery tickets were on sale, the sight of him was enough to make the books disappear rapidly into pockets. He was one of Colonel Leroy's men, and would automatically take a firm line with petty corruption.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE LADY BISHOPS OF CAO DAI

#### I

THE religion of Vietnam is a confusion. In theory it is Great Vehicle Buddhist. In the early years of Buddhism schisms rent the new faith: eventually two codes were formed. One, the Little Vehicle, held strictly to the teaching of Buddha—as a Teacher, not as a god: this is the predominant religion in Ceylon, Burma and Cambodia. The Great Vehicle, prevailing in India, China and Japan, deified the Buddha, and added dozens of additional Buddhas which personified qualities or desires: and Bodhisattvas, or humans qualifying for divine rank. In its progress across Asia, the Great Vehicle became almost all-embracing: it assimilated without effort the numberless Brahman deities of India, and was affected by the doctrines of Confucius and Lao-Tse in China. By the time it reached Indo-China it had lost its shape. With Buddha still as a kind of presiding deity, it includes everything from ancestor-worship to animism. A single pagoda serves for the worship of a dozen or a hundred gods. Each village—often each family—has its own, in addition to the central divinities and the genii or spirits who rule most normal occasions—to say nothing of the demons or evil spirits who strive to intrude. Thus there is nothing static or stereotyped about the religion of the Vietnamese. He may fashion his own, and still remain within the broad tolerance of the Great Vehicle.

So formless a creed could never tend to a very serious or devoted worship: it degenerates too easily into mere superstition. Thus French missionaries did not find it over difficult to break through its feeble hold, and there exists to-day an organized Vietnamese Catholic Church with more than two million adherents. Some of these may still tend to incorporate some of their old gods within their new religion, but the priests are



tolerant and patient. Wisely, the hierarchy of the Church is Vietnamese and not French.

At Ben Tré I had seen village Catholic churches. I also found others which looked from the outside like Catholic churches, though their interiors were very different. An array of images rested on their altars—Buddha, Confucius, Lao-Tse—and Jesus Christ, surrounded by dragons!

"We belong to Cao Dai, the new religion," said a priest. "We have been directed to take our precepts from the best teachings of all the older faiths."

There were many people among the Vietnamese masses on whom the multiplicity of gods and of ideas must have had a sobering effect: people searching seriously for light might not find it in graven images or in the hierarchies of good and evil spirits. In the early 1920's a Vietnamese civil servant, Ngo-van-Chieu, experimented in spiritualism. He was a man of fine moral character, an adherent to the stern rules of Taoism. Now he found himself in spiritual contact with one Cao Dai, who revealed himself as the Supreme Being.

In 1926 a small group of Vietnamese civil servants, using the planchette, also received spirit messages from Cao Dai. They got into touch with Chieu, but he declined the honour of establishing the new faith. However, it began to spread, its messages received by mediums and passed on to others.

## II

Cao Dai, the Supreme Being, revealed that at different epochs he had founded spirit worship, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity—each based on the usages and customs of the races destined to receive them. But now that the world was thoroughly explored and was rapidly becoming unified, there might be disharmony in the multiplicity of religions—which had, moreover, been robbed of their true validity by the teachings of ignorant men. Cao Dai had therefore decided to unite them in a single and simple creed which would appeal to all men.

The doctrine reminded a man of his duties towards his family and society—that is, to humanity. He was to despise such



Vietnamienne



Vietnamese



Old Moï



Village Elder, Vietnam





Achievement—Boys' School, Hué



—Medical Post

worldly things as luxury and riches: instead, he should seek in spirituality the full quietude of the soul. He should worship God, and venerate the Superior Spirits of the occult August Hierarchy. He should believe in the existence of the soul and the survival of the physical body, in reincarnation, and in spiritual communication with the departed.

Since there was nothing in this doctrine which could not be accepted by any serious-minded non-Catholic Vietnamese (it has certain affinities with Theosophy), the new religion soon began to make ground. It developed an organization which appealed to those who had found the loose ties of the Great Vehicle inadequate: further, it offered opportunities of advancement to those who entered its fold early.

Its first pope was one of its founders: His Holiness Le-van-Trung, who took the religious name of Thuong-Trung-Nhuri. He died in 1934, but to the Caodaists he is only 'disincarnated', and will return in some other form. Hence the present leader, Pham-Cong-Tac, does not claim the title of pope, though he exercises the functions: he is the Superior, and by his gifts as a medium still transmits the orders of the disincarnated pope.

Caodaism has now more than a million adherents—one of its officers claimed two million, including members in Europe and U.S.A. It has a cathedral and Holy See near Tay Ninh, about fifty miles north-west of Saigon, and thither I sped to satisfy the interest generated by the daughter church at Ben Tré.

Tay Ninh itself is a Catholic stronghold, but a few miles east of the town the Cao Dai leaders have bought an estate: it covers about a hundred square kilometres, and can be extended. Within its fences live thousands of the converted, each family on its own little farm. Schools and social services were of the 'model' type: this was a show-piece.

But just inside the ceremonial gates of this Holy See was a building rather like a modern pier pavilion, in light, gay colours. Two square embellished towers guarded its portal, and an ascending series of roofs suggested side galleries. This was the Cao Dai cathedral.

A notice in several languages asked visitors to remove their shoes. I mounted the steps, which were guarded by two



enormous 'defenders' in coloured stone—or it may have been plaster. But the vestibule contained a surprise. Here was a large painting of three of the Cao Dai saints: one was a Vietnamese notability, Nguyen Binh Khiem, locally known as Trang Tring: the second was Ton Trung Sen, the creator of the Chinese Republic—that is to say, Sun Yat Sen: the third was given the name of Nguyet Tan Chon Nhon—who proved to be Victor Hugo!

In his uniform as an officer of the French Academy, he was writing *Dieu et Humanité, Amour et Justice*, which his companions copied in Chinese and Vietnamese.

Victor Hugo is among the Cao Dai saints. Canonization is reserved for those who have best served mankind, but Victor Hugo has been one of the most prolific communicants from beyond the grave. He is available for consultation by mediums at all times: what is more, he replies in poetry—already his spirit messages make up a considerable literature. I quote one short fragment, in literal translation.

"I wish to be instructed regarding the origin of our Master and his Power," said the medium. Immediately Hugo began a long recitation.

*"It is not easy to know this mystery,  
The eternal searching of the question is not clear.  
It is possible that there are, in my opinion,  
Other universes than ours in the infinite.  
They would be more or less enormous,  
But life and their beings would have the same form.  
Peace and harmony rule these earths,  
Their creatures know not the word 'War'.  
Nothing is relative, all is absolute;  
Great souls vie with each other in virtue.  
All production is science and wisdom,  
Soul-power is master of human weakness."*

True, all this may not seem to mean very much, but as impromptu poetry it has its points.

But if the entrance to the cathedral is somewhat surprising, its interior is startling. The designers of the Festival of Britain would love it: so would Walt Disney, who would scarcely need

to change a dragon to make it serve as a background to one of his fantasies.

Its roof, painted sky-blue and picked out with stars of mirrored glass, is supported by two rows of a dozen pillars, each encircled by fantastic dragons in fancy hues. The floor is in nine stages, each a few inches higher than the last. The initiates begin at the lowest level and gradually move up as they become 'adept'. By the altar are six chairs for the cardinals, and one for the pope—now never occupied. Behind is a flimsy globe, the world dominated by an all-seeing eye—the symbol of Cao Dai. The windowless windows, also of strange design, supported this emblem.

### III

Caodaism has one quality usually lacking in Eastern religions: it gives a fair show to women.

This was not so at first, but the pope argued firmly with the Supreme Being. At last God was constrained to admit, "Well, I may have made a mistake about that"—for he is a conversational Master—and women were forthwith admitted to something near equality with men. There are not only priestesses, but bishopesses, archbishopesses, and one cardinalesse.

It was a lady bishop who gave me some practical details of the organization.

"We are vegetarians. We are not hard on novices, and at first give them ten days indulgence a month. Then it is reduced to six days, then to two. In the superior grades, vegetarianism is absolute—our only indulgences are eggs, cheese, butter and milk.

"We cut ourselves off from communication as far as possible with the outside world, since it is contaminating. We must not smoke, chew betel, or observe other worldly practices. We must cultivate a calm and receptive spirit, and must obey without questions all injunctions of our superior.

"We must go to prayer daily—to church, or in our own homes. The Great Prayer takes place every tenth day, but the others must not be missed.

"Yes, of course, we encourage marriage among our young people—we have an impressive and affecting ceremony. If the



man—or woman—moves on into the hierarchy, he or she is not required to put away the partner. They live for the rest of their lives as brother and sister, not indulging in sexual intercourse. In the higher grades, obviously, sex must be subordinated, lest it should dominate the mind and drive out thoughts of the Supreme Being.

"There are vestments for all ranks, men and women: symbolism plays a great part in our worship. The colours are determined by the branch of the faith emphasized. Our Confucianist ranks are concerned with rites, and wear purple robes, the symbol of authority: the Taoists specialize in education and charity, and wear azure gowns, the symbol of tolerance: those of the Buddhists wear saffron yellow, the symbol of virtue: they are concerned with finance and buildings—very practical matters.

"Indeed, we honour Jesus Christ sincerely. If He appears to rank after the other three, it is only because He came to the world centuries later.

"The merciful Buddha preached devotion and charity: Taoism prescribes the worship of truth and the discipline of character: the sage Confucius taught the way of the Golden Mean. Jesus Christ is a kind of link between them, a co-ordinator of their wisdom, emphasizing goodness and virtue.

"It is nearly time for the midday prayer. Let us go to the temple."

A crowd of white-robed figures had gathered outside: now coloured vestments appeared, and the people formed behind them in two long lines, men to the right, women to the left. They filed into the temple, walked with dignity to the spaces appropriate to their rank, then squatted on the ground with almost Moslem precision—a surprising feat considering that the Vietnamese have little idea of formal order. In the gallery a band was playing—one-stringed fiddles and cymbals—and a choir of girls began a chant of Western rather than Oriental rhythm. Periodically a bell sounded, and the congregation bowed low towards the altar. Then a priest held up ceremonial gifts with ritualistic movements.

Of one thing at least there could be no doubt: the sincerity of the Cao Dai adherents.

## IV

Yet the religious background is only part of the Cao Dai story.

A firmly organized community over a million strong is bound to be a power in a state like Vietnam, where political parties scarcely exist. Hence one Cao Dai representative is deputy Prime Minister, and others hold further responsible positions.

This is just as well, for at present Cao Dai is a state within a state. It has its own flag—yellow, with a blue corner emblazoned with a circle bursting into nine flames. Round about the Holy See live about 100,000 co-religionists—and they pay taxes to their church, not to the government!

Cao Dai even has its own private army! It was formed to defend its own territory at a time when the government was weak, and has since continued in being. It numbers 3,800 regular troops and 10,000 local auxiliaries, who man defence posts about the Cao Dai territory. It is amply supplied with generals and colonels—promotion prospects must be much brighter than in the regular Vietnam army. The government accepts its peculiar status—for the moment!—since it needs all possible aid against the Viet Minh. Technically the troops are now regarded as supplementary forces to the French army, and a small French military mission exists at Tay Ninh to arrange liaison in operations.

The cynic would contend that there is a suggestion of comic opera about the whole thing. Five miles away a 3,000 feet high mountain rises abruptly from the plains. It has long been prominent in the religious history of Vietnam, but at present it is in Viet Minh hands. One would have thought that a determined effort might have secured it, but a 'live and let live' policy appears to prevail.

The unreal atmosphere was reflected when the Cao Dai chief of staff quarrelled with his fellows and set up yet another army of his own—to occupy territory between the Holy See and the Viet Minh. Months afterwards he discovered that he had left behind some equipment he needed—so he came back with lorries to fetch it!

His disaffection was not the only example. A new religion



is apt to encourage ambitious personalities, and already Cao Dai has suffered eleven major schisms. And each of the dissident factions has set up its own pope, cardinals and the rest of the hierarchy! The church I had seen at Ben Tré represented one of the schisms—because here the local people objected to Cao Dai intrusion into politics and its private armies.

Some of these trimmings will have to be shed. The 'state within a state' absurdity is not likely to endure once Vietnam is firmly established and at peace. But as a faith Cao Dai seems likely to survive and prosper. It meets local needs and conforms to local ideas. If it can forget its internecine feuds and personal jealousies, and instead concentrate on its high ideals, no one will be entitled to sneer at some of its ritual practices, eccentric to Western eyes but quite normal in their own place.

## CHAPTER SIX

### TO MEET THE EMPEROR

#### I

"I AM commanded by His Majesty the Emperor Bao Dai to bid you welcome to Ban Methuot, and to express the hope that you will be the guest of His Majesty during your stay," said a precise little man as I stepped from the aircraft.

Nothing could be fairer than that. I made a suitable reply, and the Emperor's car whisked us off to a substantial wooden building on sturdy piles.

"The Bungalow," my receptionist announced—though in size it resembled a country club. "The Emperor himself designed it, to house his guests and some members of his personal staff."

There another man awaited me—Nguyen Dê, President of the Council—that is, chief of the Emperor's personal advisers. I knew his son in London, and he gave me a very friendly welcome: indeed, I discovered later that he had flown from the north especially to meet me.

"His Majesty awaits you," he announced.

"What? I thought my audience was fixed for to-morrow?"

"His Majesty expressed a wish to see you immediately on your arrival."

"Give me five minutes!" I was not very familiar with court etiquette, nor am I ever a sartorial delight, but I did know that a visit to an emperor demanded my best trousers.

It was only a hundred yards to the palace, but I was conducted by car. The palace was actually a modest country house of perhaps ten or fifteen rooms. I was shown into the lounge—which, as often in the larger Vietnam houses, gave direct on to the hall.

It was plainly but comfortably furnished. The wall decorations consisted of photographs of the Emperor's sporting triumphs—he is a famous shot.



"You will not need an interpreter? I have one available."

"I prefer not."

"Very good."

This suited me very well. I did not want a formal interview—such things are seldom rewarding, since the subject must think too carefully of every word. A casual chat is often more revealing.

I looked out of the window. Ban Methuot seemed a pleasant place. I had flown direct from Saigon. As far as Dalat we had crossed the great rice plains; then sizeable mountains loomed ahead—I learned that the airport of Dalat was twenty miles from the town—there was no flat space nearer. Then my agile Dakota, the jeep of the skies, began to leap over range after range of forest-clad mountains, till a wide plateau was reached. It appeared to be entirely covered with jungle, but the aircraft found a small clearing. This was Ban Methuot, the Emperor's country home.

I was looking at a photograph of a goya, the giant wild buffalo in the region—a very powerful beast which can kill a tiger in single combat—when the Emperor was announced. He is forty years of age, a little above the Vietnam average in height and build. He wore a well-cut white duck suit. His face is wide and intelligent.

We sat at ease. Evidently he expected a barrage of questions, but was obviously pleased when I preferred a conversation. His sporting activities made a useful opening. He seems to be a specialist in tigers—in the last year he has shot fifteen, two of them only a week previously—one within a few hundred yards of the palace.

He preferred to shoot from the back of an elephant, he said. The procedure seemed to be that favoured in India—beaters driving the tiger to some district where shooting is possible: or the bait of a dead deer left in some open space.

I asked after his eyes—usually he is seen wearing dark glasses. He admitted difficulty: after reading only five or six pages his eyes felt tired. He had taken the best advice in Europe, but apparently the deficiency was not in the eyes themselves, but in his bodily condition—a faulty liver, I believe. The trouble had not yet affected his skill with a rifle, but he appeared somewhat apprehensive.

We passed on to the war situation—in the atmosphere of a conversation we burked no issues. His confidence in victory was not forced. Then we passed on to considerations of Vietnam after the war: his views were far more sensible than many others I had encountered. Too many Vietnamese seem to think that when the war is won all will be well. Yet the end of the war is only the beginning of the problems of a reborn country. He hoped that outside aid would be available to help repair war devastation, but in general he looked to his own people to help themselves.

Bao Dai was fully conscious of the heterogeneous character of his country, and realized that the Vietnamese, although forming the bulk of the population, were not the whole of it. He seemed to be especially interested in the welfare of the backward tribes. I have mentioned that the inclusive word 'Moïs' means savages: Bao Dai has now forbidden the use of this derogatory word: the Moïs tribes have become the mountain peasants.

At first slightly reserved, he was now taking his full part in the conversation. He asked many questions about the Coronation—where the Crown Prince was to represent him. Then we turned to the subject of literature—or, rather, to my own books. When I mentioned that I had written seventy-five he raised his hands in wonder. He was interested in the methods I used to gather my information—and especially in those employed to check it.

A royal audience is supposed to be limited to ten minutes, but His Majesty seemed to be in no hurry—twice I half rose from my chair, but he waved me back. When at last he rose it was with a murmur that he had some official delegations to see.

"The President of my Council has especially asked to entertain you to lunch," he said. "But you are *my* guest here. If there is anything you need while you are in Vietnam, do not hesitate to ask." He repeated the last phrase to emphasize that it was not merely a conventional platitude.

He escorted me to the verandah. Then, seeing that my escort held my camera: "You would like a photograph?"

"My children would. And even some of my readers, maybe."

It was unfortunate that the camera was slightly out of focus: it is not often that I am photographed beside an emperor.



## II

Before I left Saigon, word had passed around the hotel staff that I was going to see the Emperor. How the news leaked out I do not know, but the grape-vine is well developed in Vietnam. Most of the staff seemed excited, but one was uncomplimentary.

"He is of no use to us," he said. "Just another Farouk."

This, I should say, is completely untrue. I have pointed out that a formal interview is useless—in most cases it could be written up in advance—but an uninhibited conversation can give useful leads to character.

Bao Dai, I have mentioned, is a famous shot. He is also fond of racing, and is said to be a first-class poker player. There any resemblance to Farouk ends abruptly. He abhors display, and has cut down expenditure on ceremonies and abolished the lavish traditional salutes to the monarch. He abandoned the old system of polygamy, and married a commoner, now the Empress Nam Phuong—'Fragrant Breeze of the South'. (The custom of adopted and descriptive titles survives: the Emperor's own names were Vinh Thuy, and it was only on his accession that he became Bao Dai—'Guardian of Greatness'.) They have five children—a happy family. He is genuinely interested in the welfare of his people. Especially considering that he comes of a long line of monarchs who exercised absolute power, his democratic outlook is surprising.

Some of his people have been disappointed because he has not been more dramatic. They expected stirring appeals to patriotism, with all the panoply of ceremony. Yet it seemed to me that Bao Dai is by nature a shy man: I should imagine that his public appearances are ordeals for him—to be endured in the national cause, but not to be sought for popular acclaim.

There may be another reason—I am only guessing, but time will show. I have emphasized his interest in his country's progress after the war has been won. In this he will have to play a prominent part. His argument may run: I must not attach myself too closely to the French. I appreciate all they have done and are doing, and shall always hope to be their friend. But this is Vietnam: when national feelings are fully roused, they can assume extreme forms. It may be my duty to control these,

but if at such a moment it could be claimed that I was a French puppet, then my authority would be weakened. The war is not yet won, but now, with American and British aid added to French, its issue is surely certain. Hence there is no need for me to make dramatic appeals to the populace. Then, at the right moment, I can reveal myself as a patriotic leader.

I do not know if this is his policy—we must wait and see. Maybe a little more drama would rouse Vietnam enthusiasm and so end the war earlier. But I am convinced that the Emperor is a very astute man—a good poker player in high politics as well as with cards.

His career has not been easy. I have already mentioned some of its salient points: he was ruler of Annam under the French, then a Japanese-dominated emperor, next 'political adviser' to Ho Chi Minh, and now Emperor of all Vietnam. I do not think that personal considerations have counted much in those rather startling changes of status. He may have been wrong, but he has always tried to consider the interests of his people. Further, it should be realized that changes of front do not mean in the Orient what they do in Europe—the Vietnamese well appreciate his adaptive approach to differing circumstances.

It is true that he is still little more than a name to a big proportion of his people—and it is probably true that he could rouse them to more earnest action by a more dramatic and public approach. But the fact that he declines to make this disproves at least one complaint: since the French press continuously for such action, his reluctance shows that he is no French puppet.

(I heard one witticism about the Emperor which, if unkind, was at least amusing: someone spoke of his shyness and referred to him as 'The Reluctant Dragon'.)

But if my reading of the situation is correct, and Bao Dai is deliberately biding his time, he ought at least to appreciate the risk. His policy depends entirely upon a French-Vietnam victory, which in turn depends largely upon a greatly increased Vietnamese share of effort: this has yet to be aroused: if the Emperor and his ministers fail to do this, tragedy would result. It is good to look well ahead, but it is essential to watch the next corner. Unless and until the Viet Minh are defeated, there is no place in Vietnam for a benevolent emperor.



## III

"And now for the afternoon," said Nguyen Dê, after a magnificent lunch. "The Emperor has placed one of his cars at your disposal, and you can take my secretary as your guide. What would you like to see?"

"Some of the Mois—I mean, the mountain peasants."

We set off in great comfort. The road was of beaten red earth, but quite passable until the rainy season began. It was bordered by jungle: shrubs and thorns rose quickly to a height of ten or twelve feet—yet were not as dense as the jungle of Malaya: the scene reminded me more of Burma. Occasionally the vista of green and brown was relieved by a flame tree, with an enormous spread of brilliant crimson blossom.

After about twenty miles we came to a waterfall: when in full spate it must be a magnificent sight, for it spread across a valley a mile wide. Now it is to be tamed: part of the river is to be diverted, to plunge down an artificial chute to a power-station below.

Half a dozen men were fishing in the pools. Their costume was peculiar: some wore nothing but a Gee-string and an apron a foot square, while others added a rough jacket, not unlike a football jersey. None had any use for trousers.

We made our way to their village, Dray-Hling. The houses were all raised on piles as a protection against wild animals, and some of them were at least two hundred feet long. The headman appeared—in a tattered khaki jacket but no trousers. Conversation was difficult—these mountain tribes speak not a Vietnam dialect, but a language of their own. However, the headman produced two young men who were fully dressed, and spoke French.

"The Rhadés are the most advanced of all the mountain tribes," said one. "Some of them even work."

"But how do the others live?"

"Oh, they fish, and they sometimes raise small crops. And there are always the women. But now some work on the road—for money, I mean."

Under one of the huts a woman was weaving in the most primitive fashion I ever saw: she had no loom, but passed each

thread by hand: she would be lucky if she did a couple of inches a day. True, the men's costume was scanty, and she herself wore a short skirt, but nothing from the waist upwards.

Generally the space beneath the houses was occupied by pens for poultry and pigs—very substantial buildings, to resist marauding tigers and other beasts. The pigs, incidentally, had long pointed snouts, and had obviously derived from the wild variety.

"May I go into one of the huts?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, they want to make you a brother."

Somewhat mystified, I climbed on to the high platform using a notched post—my feet far too large for the notches. We made our way along the hut: it was of timber supports, with woven leaf walls and thatched roof. It was roughly divided into rooms about twenty feet by twenty: each was occupied by a large family. The sole furniture consisted of large pots and palm leaf mats. After passing four or five family residences, we came to the common room—at least one-third of the house. Here about a hundred people had gathered. Sartorial fashions varied. Generally the men were concerned about their upper half, the women the lower—they wore a rough wrapped skirt and nothing else. Some, however, were more completely clothed—even some of the children. "The Rhadés are very advanced," said one of our guides, proudly.

My Vietnamese friend and I were asked to sit in front of two huge pots, filled to the brim with liquid. A man appeared with a white cockerel, with which he made mystic passes in front of our faces, to the accompaniment of loud banging on gongs by a dozen men of the tribe. Then another man began an interminable incantation—I gathered later that he was wishing for us long life, peace and happiness. He seemed to be carried away by his recital: his eyes strayed as if he were in a trance.

Bamboo reeds, four or five feet long, emerged from the huge pots. The incantator bent them down to our lips, and indicated that we were to suck. I knew that the liquid was rice alcohol, and that I was supposed to drink as much as three cows' horns would hold. But there are limits to my anxiety to please friends. It was not merely that the drink tasted vile: as soon as its



surface was lowered, water was added. And the water came from the local pond. As I passed it, buffaloes were wallowing in it, and men and women washing themselves. I am not too nervous about microbes, but after one ceremonial suck I placed my tongue firmly over the end of my tube.

I was now instructed to exchange places with my Vietnamese partner—who was looking rather scared over the whole business. Then a man fastened a brass ring about each of our wrists—we were now brothers of the tribe. By this time the white cockerel had been sacrificed, but I had been so occupied that I had not noticed how.

We handed over our bamboo reeds to two women—one, at a guess, well over eighty. These were the wife and mother-in-law of the man I had taken to be the head of the tribe. It appeared that authority was maternal, and all rights descended on the woman's side of the family. These two ladies were the real chiefs of the tribe.

I discovered that I had escaped lightly at my initiation with the sacrifice of a cockerel. Had I wished to move up a degree in brotherhood, a pig would have been killed; blood would have been drawn from my leg, and mixed with that of the pig, and then drunk by all present, including me. To make the drink more palatable, rice alcohol would be added.

But for a really important occasion, like the dedication of a new house to the gods, a buffalo is sacrificed. The Moïs regard the useful buffalo as being above all ordinary animals but below human beings: therefore, by their logic, it is entitled to a ceremonial death. If a man dies suddenly, his ghost is condemned to wander for ever, but a lingering illness gives the spirits time to arrange for eternal rest.

By this reasoning, the sacrificial buffalo must die slowly and painfully. The unfortunate beast is tied by the neck to a stout post in the ground. Gongs and drums are sounded as the villagers gather. Then two men, carrying their solid all-purpose weapon, half-axe and half-knife, dash in and slash at the buffalo's hind legs. Next men with lances prod it—its death rites may occupy half an hour, and a Spanish bull-fight is kindly in comparison. Should the buffalo shown signs of dying too early, it is given a drink of rice alcohol to revive it!

Once dead, the buffalo is promptly roasted. But if by any chance it should break away from the post and escape into the jungle, no attempt is made to follow it. Obviously it is not the wish of the spirits that the buffalo should die.

The Moïs are improvident, and take little thought for the morrow in food, but all the houses seemed to be well supplied with rice alcohol. I regret to report that occasionally I found the entire population of a village under its influence. Even the animals—for dogs and pigs lick up liquid which overflows from the great jars. I saw even a company of hens whose conduct was very suspicious: they walked erratically, and I am certain that none of them could have clucked 'Moïs constitution'. Later I saw them clustering beneath a hut, evidently hoping that some drains of liquor would escape through the loose floor of bamboo matting.

Drunkenness is quite respectable among the Moïs. It is rated as the essence of conviviality, which is a virtue. The Moïs greeting is not 'How do you do?' but *Nam lu*—which means 'Let's get drunk together.'

A similar outlook pervades tribal justice. If a man kills another it matters not whether it is by accident or design—the punishment is the same: not death, for the spirits are primarily responsible—and in any case if a man were summarily executed his ghost would haunt the village. Hence the crime can be expiated by gifts to the gods—which means a tribal feast—and a payment in cash or cattle to the offended family. On the other hand, the theft of water or rice are shocking offences, since both commodities are under the special protection of the spirits. The punishment is severe—banishment from the tribe.

The French policy has been to interfere as little as possible with tribal customs. They hope that the new education will effect a gradual change in ideas. This is possible—it may be that the present generation will be the last of the Moïs.

Yet it would be folly to expect over-rapid advances. The Moïs have been isolated for centuries—and when the world treats men as savages, they tend to become savages. Fear of spirits dominates their lives, and their religious ideas are based almost entirely on propitiation of local gods.

Yet the Moïs are brave people. They face the tiger armed



only with a primitive cross-bow. They trap elephants and train them for domestic labour. They are ill-fed, yet amazingly tough.

I returned to Ban Methuot well content with my day. To meet the Emperor and become a brother of the Rhadés tribe were sufficient accomplishments for any twenty-four hours. Yet I had not quite finished. As we approached the little town my Vietnamese friend pointed to a pleasant house.

"An American missionary lives there," he said.

"Let us call."

Actually Mr. Gordon Hedderley Smith was a Canadian, born in England, but he represented an American Protestant mission—the only one of its kind working in Indo-China.

"I'm not sure that I ought to receive you," he smiled, after I had admired a tiger skin on his floor—he had shot the beast while on the rounds of his outposts.

"Why?"

"An English writer came here a couple of years ago, and in his book lampooned me fiercely. True, he called me Jones, whereas my name is Smith: and gave me a beard, while I have none. But the disguise was quite inadequate.

"A missionary does not mind being lampooned—he is used to it. But some of the things the man said about my work were outright lies. He said, for example, that I preached to the tribes in English—can you ever imagine anything more fantastic? Actually, I speak fifteen of the Moïs languages. He said that I bought my converts—that is false. Many of my churches are completely self-supporting. I have a staff of seventy local pastors. My people are fervent worshippers—they meet, not once a week, but every night, to sing hymns if no preacher is available. True, I do occasionally give a blanket to a leper. Is that a crime? My mission runs a leper station, among other things—and this writer asserted that I was not interested in the social welfare of the people!"

I agreed that he had been libelled—an opinion which grew in force as I saw more of his devoted work. As an added interest, he was a trained anthropologist, and had written a number of books on the characteristics of his primitive people.

"Yes, when I first arrived here language was my biggest diffi-

culty—not to learn it, but to translate Christian truths into the Moï's tongues. They are completely inadequate. When I was translating the New Testament story into one local language I came to the text, 'God is love'. I suppose we might claim that this is the essence of the Christian faith. But the nearest I could get to it in these primitive and very restricted languages was, 'The Great Spirit is not angry'. When you think of it, there is a little difference!"



## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DAY TRIP TO DALAT

#### I

AEROPLANES can be exceedingly convenient, but to me their speed does not compensate for the loss of contact with people on the ground. Hence I proposed to make the journey to Dalat by road. I was warned that it would be rough, though admittedly a jeep could do it. The main road was out of action—bridges were down; but an alternative was available. It covered 300 kilometres, and there was nothing but a few Moïs villages between Ban Methuot and Dalat, so that it was essential to complete it in a day: a night in the open might be uncomfortable, for this was a land of tigers and elephants, to say nothing of what was more detestable—snakes.

While Nguyen Dê was making this clear, I noticed signs of excitement in a young French officer attached to the Emperor's staff.

"They will insist that you have an escort," he whispered, at the first available moment.

"A pity, but——"

"Do you mind if I come? My wife had her first baby at Dalat six weeks ago—you can imagine what a chance it would be for me!"

So we set off very early. Lieutenant Chavanne drove the jeep, and a Vietnamese soldier sat at the back. Our total armament consisted of one tommy-gun and two rifles.

It proved to be one of the most fascinating day's rides I have ever made. The road plunged immediately into the thick jungle-forest, high with thorn and bamboo—and yet dense with trees. These were not very big—there were too many of them, and a diameter of more than a foot was unusual—but often of a great height.

The road was rough. It had once been metalled, but in the

rainy season many stretches had been washed away. But the jeep tackled its eccentricities gaily, leaving a trail of red dust.

Close by the small Moïs village of Dakmil a few square miles of jungle had been cleared, and long rows of abrasin—an oil-bearing shrub—stood in ordered precision. The plantation was a triumph of enterprise. Three soldiers of a French armoured unit took their demobilization in Vietnam, and invested their gratuities in a battle of a new kind of enemy—Nature. They needed all their courage. Clearing a small patch of jungle, they planted their first trees—and the crop failed! They persevered, and must now be prosperous. The jungle is free to anyone who attempts to exploit it, but when the ground yields crops the government claims a share.

There was a sawmill at Dakson, the next village, but Chavanne drove the jeep into a police post, solidly enclosed within barbed wire. A few Vietnamese police were about, but one of the two French sergeants was on leave, the other on patrol. However, there is a special camaraderie in deserted regions, and we took possession of his room and helped ourselves to cutlery and plates.

The Emperor's cook had prepared a huge parcel for me, evidently allowing for my escort as well: I could feel the ends of half a dozen bottles among the provisions. Chavanne had had exactly the same idea, and his soldier carried in a large box. The previous day the Frenchman had shot a deer, and now he produced an attractive cold roast. We had nearly finished an excellent meal when the sergeant returned.

His was a lonely life, but he did not complain. His district was now clear of Viet Minh: he displayed a captured banner—a yellow star on a red ground—and some wicked-looking cutlasses: one bore three marks on its haft, indicating that it had removed three heads. The Moïs were very little trouble—'just like children,' he said, though he admitted that even children can be naughty. He had been initiated as a brother into so many tribes that he had made his brass rings into a chain!

Hitherto, rough though it was, we had been travelling the main road from Ban Methuot to Saigon. Now we turned on to a forest track: Chavanne called it *sportive*, and did not exaggerate. It was of beaten earth, unmetalled; there were huge pot-holes, and occasionally stretches of the road had fallen into



the valley, leaving only the narrowest of tracks. We made our way over the gentle ridges of the tableland.

Then, at a natural clearing in the jungle, our soldier pointed excitedly ahead. There was the biggest wild boar I ever saw—an enormous black brute. The braking of the jeep startled him, and he began to run. Chavanne and I chased after him, but before we could get within range he had reached the shelter of the dense forest.

At its edge I hesitated. Our arms were adequate to tackle a tiger, or maybe even an elephant. But, "I'm not going after him. Look!" I pointed to a sleeping python. "I don't like snakes."

"Neither do I!"

So we went back to the jeep.

Twenty kilometres afterwards came a sequel to the incident. Here was another clearing, with thick grass growing three or four feet high. Then I saw another black form among it.

"Look!"

Chavanne braked the jeep gently. Evidently our quarry had not heard us. We could see the whole of his expansive black back—his head was down, evidently feeding.

We crept quietly nearer: then divided, so as to distribute our shots. We were almost in position when the black body moved, and raised its head. This was just as well for him—and for us, or the comedy might have been expensive. For the beast was no boar, but a buffalo—a tame one, with a ring through his nose!

The Moïs do not use their buffalo for domestic ploughing and similar tasks, but keep them for sacrifices on very special occasions. As we passed through the adjacent village, we tried to imagine our reception had we told them that we had just slaughtered their next sacrifice. I doubt if my brass ring of brotherhood would have been enough to pacify them.

## II

I have seen films of forest fires, and they are rather terrifying. Once or twice we had seen patches of smoke, but now a huge cloud lay ahead.

The Moïs, I have said, are primitive. They do not even use the simple methods of rice production favoured on the plains: they burn down a section of the forest just before the rainy season, plant out rice seedlings, and hope for the best. Usually they get a small crop.

We had now chanced on one of these fires—and it had got out of hand: the childish tribesmen had not allowed sufficiently for the force of the wind, which had already carried the fire far beyond the area they wished to clear. Savage flames rose fifty feet in the air: bamboos exploded in the heat, in a series of sharp thunders like an artillery barrage. And the flames were now separated from the miserable village of thatched huts only by the width of the road.

Men and women were running to the brook, scooping up water in any available receptacle, and flinging it on to the thatched roofs. Some were so anxious that their ability to act had gone—they simply stared helplessly at the enemy they had created.

We waited to do what we could. This tribe certainly justified the claim that the Rhadés were comparatively advanced. Their shacks were built at ground level, and were as primitive as any I ever saw in Africa. They had none of the sporadic modern touches of the Rhadés. None of the women wore anything more than a rough skirt, wrapped casually around the hips. Again some of the men had ragged jackets, with Gee-strings and aprons—not a pair of trousers in the tribe. Yet the conventions were strictly observed. A woman's skirt fell off while she was carrying water. She seemed quite unperturbed, but halted to put it on again before continuing her task.

The danger seemed to pass: the crackling of the bamboos, with its accompanying flame and smoke, passed beyond the village. We moved on.

"It is due to rain at fifteen hours," said Chavanne. "We have a ferry to cross—and the men may go home when it rains—they may think that no one will come."

Yet who could hurry through so wild yet fascinating a scene? The forest crowded on us: birds of gay plumage darted across our path—one of a delicate blue which would have delighted Maeterlinck. Then another village appeared in the clearing—tidier than the last, with its houses on the familiar stilts.



One house was distinguished by bamboo ladders instead of notched trunks. A young man stood on its verandah. He wore the fashionable little apron—and a blue shirt.

"I am the educator," he explained.

I recalled the two fully dressed men in the Rhadés village. They, too, were 'educators'.

It can be imagined that the primitive Moïs present a serious administrative and social problem. Any changes must be made tactfully and gradually. So their region, with a population of nearly a million, has been declared a 'special area'; it does not come under normal government machinery, but is controlled by an Administrator, a Frenchman, working directly under the Emperor. P.M.S. is its official designation—*Pays montagnard, sud*: there is another in the Thai country of the north.

Obviously the first advance must be educational. The Moïs, unlike the Vietnamese, are completely uninterested in such things, and have to be persuaded.

The French have experimented with a series of 'penetration schools' in suitable centres. To these come youths from the tribes selected for their brightness and intelligence: they are educated by a special staff, and then sent back to their villages.

This young man of the Sre tribe was one of the products of the penetration schools. On his return the tribe had built a school, and we saw the class in being—fifty-one small boys and two girls, all practically naked. Clever French philologists have adapted the Moïs languages to the Latin alphabet, and the best pupils were able to read and write hesitantly. It was only a beginning, but in the amazingly primitive conditions it was remarkable.

The children were even taught some French, but this is to be replaced shortly by Vietnamese. This is a forward-looking decision. Within a generation or two these tribes will be sending representatives to a Vietnam parliament.

We halted for a second lunch, and found that the Emperor's cook had been imperial in his culinary provision. Then we pushed on as rapidly as the road would allow. I knew that it was no idle fancy to quote the exact hour when the rain would come. We were running into mountain country, where the monsoon rains come long before they break over the plains.

We could almost have set our watches by the first drops. The

rain descended in a torrent. The earth road became a greasy and treacherous slide, and only first-class driving kept the jeep going. It slithered down a steep mountain track, sliding sideways almost as often as forward. Below was a broad river: on the other side a primitive barge.

We espied men sheltering in a hut on the hillside: despite the primitive fury of the rain, they came out as soon as they heard us. True, getting wet does not mean too much when your only clothing is a loin cloth.

They hauled the barge over by pulling on overhead ropes. Then we faced a steep climb on the other side.

"This road will soon be closed for the next six months," said Chavanne. "The Administrator himself was killed in the last rainy season," he added cheerfully. "His car fell off the road into the river—just about here!"

With the inducement of his wife and son ahead, he did not need any admonitions to keep our jeep *on* the road. By this time we had ceased to pay attention to our surroundings. The eternal forest was still there, and I caught a hazy glimpse through the beating rain of one or two more villages, but all our attention was concentrated on getting on—we were still a long way from Dalat.

However, at Djiring we struck the main Saigon-Dalat road, with a good surface. Now we had only fifty miles to go, and soon after dark began the long climb up to Dalat itself.

Then we made an awkward discovery. I imagined that he knew where to take me, while he thought that I knew where to go!

I knew that *some* arrangements had been made, and the previous evening had heard mention of the Ambion Hotel. Chavanne correctly interpreted this as the Lambian Palais Hotel, and we drove to an imposing edifice.

But the manager had never heard of me. Surveying my wet and dirty appearance, it was quite obvious that he did not want to hear of me: the hotel was full, he said firmly, and he ushered me out of the front door with contumely. Doubtless he would have used the servants' entrance, but it would have involved a journey through the lounge.

The other hotel was genuinely full—there is a military school in Dalat, and many of the cadets are billeted out. However,



Chavanne happened to know that the general was away—why should I not have his villa? At this moment the jeep, hero of a gallant journey, gave up.

After a drenching walk we reached the military office. The staff was represented by one very fed-up corporal. He did try to contact one or two responsible officers, but 8.30 p.m. is not the best time to make telephone calls. He also gave up.

But I have found one approach very valuable. The corporal's accent was familiar.

"You are from Corsica?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Cargese."

"Oh—the Greek settlement."

"You know it?" he cried in astonishment.

"Very well. Many years ago I met your famous bandit, Caviglioli, there."

"Caviglioli! Why, he married—or should have married—my cousin."

Talk to a dispirited exile of his home town for five minutes, and he is yours.

"And now," I said. "*Someone* in Dalat is expecting me. Make that telephone work until you find him."

Ten minutes later I was talking to the Emperor's personal representative. Of course I was expected—I was still the Emperor's guest—a villa was at my disposal. Then would I come at once to dinner at the Lambian Palais?

"Do not trouble to put on your smoking," he said.

I did not propose to do so—indeed, I had no 'smoking' with me. However, I did propose to change my clothes—and, before that, to remove the first layers of red mud which enclosed me. This proved to be slightly difficult. The villa was pleasant, but its lights had all fused! Its steward held my torch while I showered.

The Emperor's representative took me to the hotel. The manager greeted me effusively—it may be that he did not recognize me.

"And will your guest be staying the night?" he said to my host.

"No, he will not," I put in promptly. "But he is very

hungry." Thus I gave him the chance to make amends by providing an excellent dinner: which he did.

## III

Dalat is the Vietnam Poona: on a mountain plateau 5,000 feet above sea-level, around a small lake, even in the hot season there is air to breathe.

The little town is spread over an area half the size of Paris. Your nearest neighbour's villa may be a hundred yards away, and you need a car or a *cyclo-pousse* every time you go shopping. Not that I had the leisure—or the cash—for such a luxury: there is not much to see, but there was plenty for me to do in Dalat.

The French selected it as suitable for a military college, which has now become the chief hope of the Vietnamese army. Some of the instructors are French, and use that language, but it is possible for a Vietnamese cadet to go through the complete and concentrated course in his own tongue.

There were two batches of 220 students in residence, simply but adequately housed. The course covered the use of weapons, tactical exercises, morale, and other features of military training. An ample expanse of varied ground gave opportunity for practical work.

The college, moreover, runs special courses for Vietnamese officers who are ripe for promotion to senior posts. Another section houses 500 other ranks undergoing technical training in transport, radio, and similar subjects. They are especially good at radio: I saw no signs of despair at the complication of the delicate apparatus, and small and nimble fingers manœuvred wires into position with an agility which roused my admiration. I was not surprised to learn that French pilots on the air lines of South-East Asia prefer Vietnamese radio operators.

(Perhaps also because of the sensitiveness and skill of their fingers, Vietnamese medical men shine especially at surgery.)

The whole future of the Vietnamese army could depend upon the Dalat military college. The men seemed very keen: the only damper came from a French civilian.

"Yes, all this is doubtless very good. But the Viet Minh



officers have no school, and yet they can fight! This place can teach these cadets about weapons and fortifications, but can it make fighters of them?"

The martial spirit should surely be on the curriculum of any military college, but it is true that it is an elusive quality not to be learned from books.

At present one of the most pressing needs in Vietnam is for a large and self-contained army. The problem could become desperately urgent if the French tired of their present thankless task. Only a fraction of the Vietnamese population has been tapped: arms are available—but *Vietnamese* officers are essential to the new venture. Hence the hopes centred in the military college.

At least there could be no misgivings about Dalat's other educational venture—a School of Administration. Here fifty selected young men were being trained in systems of government: law, local matters, and national affairs were important subjects. They take a two-year course: if they secure their diploma they are appointed to junior administrative positions, with good prospects of promotion. Like every new state, Vietnam badly needs such men—my only complaint was that the school was not much larger.

I gave a short lecture on Whitehall and the British system of government administration—and then faced questions for an hour and a half. What is more, half-way through a student asked if I would take questions in English, so that my replies would give them practice in the language as well as the gain in information. The questions were remarkably intelligent: we must have spent a third of the time on British social services: the students even knew quite a lot about Mr. Aneurin Bevan. I have often pondered that a travelling Englishman should look up the institutions and customs of his own country before he goes abroad: he is certain to be asked a lot of awkward questions.

However, we finished with queries on the history and meaning of the Coronation—which I found a very topical subject all over Vietnam.

The school promises well. I was pleased with the final moments of my stay. The last question gave me the opportunity to introduce a short but serious homily on the appalling dangers of corruption in government services. This is an

Oriental disease: I do not wish to infer that its ravages are greater in Vietnam than elsewhere—probably the reverse is true. But I was very concerned, not only at its existence, but at its acceptance by the population. If a man is appointed to a position of authority, it is expected that he will rapidly achieve riches—it would not be understood if he failed to do so. When a woman goes to cash a postal order for 500 piastres, she has no hope of getting the full amount—she expects the clerk to deduct his own 'cut', and would be surprised if he did not.

"And that's only the beginning," said a Vietnamese friend. "You grumble at the cost of living—have you considered the bribes that have to be paid to get a few lorry loads of vegetables through from here to Saigon? You have criticized the inefficiency of some of our offices—did you not wonder how many men *bought* their positions there? What happens when I execute a contract? I get my warrant authorizing payment—but I have to pay something on the side to several clerks before I can get it cashed. Of course, I allow for such things in my estimate. But the whole system is wrong."

I agreed whole-heartedly, but argued that by submitting to the iniquity he was supporting it. The idea is a local tradition, and will never be banished by casual words, but only by example. This could involve the punishment of people accepting bribes—and then of those offering them. But the best attack could be made by a sturdy group of men in authority, setting their faces sternly against corruption. In the past the disease has been contagious: now the remedy is something in the nature of a universal inoculation—with the leaders making the first move.

So I appealed to these young men, when they were in office, to fight against this enervating disease. I pointed out that it was incompetence and corruption, rather than Communist strength, which had brought about the fall of Chiang Kai-shek. Unchecked, it could ruin the prospects of Vietnam. As I ended on this note the students rose to applaud.



## NORTHERN CAPITAL

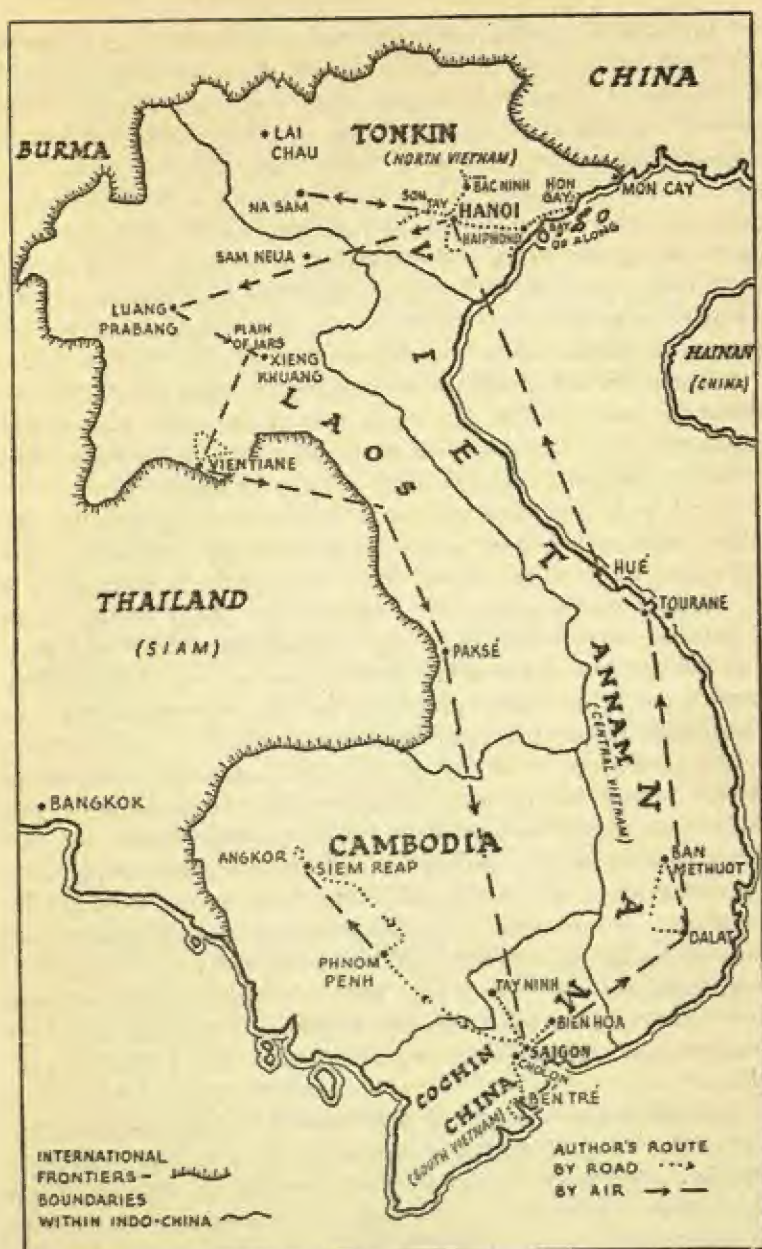
## I

I WOULD have returned to Saigon from Dalat by road. But there was still one troubled spot about 130 kilometres north-east of Saigon, and the road was open only on Mondays and Thursdays—the French had insufficient mobile troops for continuous patrols. There was occasional excitement on the transport days, for the Viet Minh sometimes seized the intervening period to lay mines in the road or adopt other restrictive practices.

Trains ran every day, however. The normal schedule was two a day, at suitable intervals. But now the service had to be planned as a military operation. An armoured train went along the line, with a pilot engine in front to take the shock of any mines or to report any missing rails. Then followed the two trains with additional goods trains, and with escorts, in convoy one immediately after the other. No one would envy the traveller or business man in Vietnam.

However, I found that an occasional aircraft called at Dalat on its journey north, and I got a lift as far as Hué. This little town was the old capital of Annam, the residence of its emperors. It is claimed that its women are especially distinguished in their manners and carriage, because of the long association of their town with royalty. I do not pretend to have noticed this distinction: for that matter, have the citizens of Windsor any remarkable superiority over their neighbours?

There are old ramparts at Hué, in Vauban style. The ancient Annamese city has been modernized, save in its slum quarters: adjoining it is a French town—not in the French style, but of conventional Colonial pattern—and a merchant town, inhabited and used by Vietnamese, Chinese and Hindu merchants. As so often in this part of the world, Hué is spread over a very wide space.





The Emperor's palace was a sad mess: the Viet Minh occupied the town for a time, and could not be expected to respect the attributes of royalty—although they had temporarily 'borrowed' the Emperor himself. Not even they dared interfere with the royal tombs, however: they might preach agnosticism, but most of their men still clung to ancient beliefs, including those of spirits and the virtue of ancestors. The tombs are some miles outside the town, and are said to be striking—even charming. One is set out with the dead king's play-things and his weapons—and a bed on which his spirit can repose whenever it revisits the tomb.

I found that I could only see the mausolea under strong military escort, for the Viet Minh control the area. So I passed them by. On a journey like mine risks have to be taken, but I was not prepared to face bullets to see a tomb.

I had been told that there was little to see in Hué, but the advice was wrong, and I was sorry when air schedules made me move on so soon. Apart from its historic interest, Hué is an enclave between two Viet Minh areas. That to the south is the more weakly held, and could perhaps be cleared by aggressive action: but to the north is the greatest area of Viet Minh strength, with its capital at Vinh. We had actually flown over Viet Minh territory on our way from Dalat.

Now a civilian Dakota sped me northwards over the sea to Hanoi. Here the narrow plain between the mountains and the sea expanded to the wide delta of the Red River.

My jeep from the airfield crossed the Doumer bridge over two branches of the river: the bridge was heavily guarded by Senegalese troops, and here there was an air of tension not discernible in the south. This was the only air available: that intended for breathing was in short supply. There were heavy clouds overhead, but in spite of this the heat was intense: the atmosphere resembled that of a hot Scotch mist.

The town was straggling, and was obviously overcrowded. Before the war its population was about 50,000: now it exceeds 300,000. The bulk of the increase consists of refugees from Viet Minh areas: the rest formed the labour and other base forces necessary to a war.

During its spell in Viet Minh hands, Hanoi suffered. Some

of the suburbs especially were damaged, with houses and temples burned. The wrecked homes might be part of the casual devastation of war, and the destruction of the temples an agnostic spite, but it was difficult to explain the sabotage of the Pasteur Institute, which had done so much to protect the population against disease.

Even at a first glance it was obvious that the easy-going standards of the south were lacking here. There seemed to be a much larger proportion of poor—not unexpected when so many had lost their all. The jackets of the women were a dingy brown instead of the southern black, and more of the men were in rags. From a distance came the rumble of artillery fire.

So I made my way to the Press Camp, and for the second time in my life found myself accredited as a war correspondent.

## II

Very few towns of Vietnam have any distinction. The stormy history of the country, and the unsubstantial character of its building materials, have militated against historic survivals. True, Hanoi has some interesting pagodas—to Buddha, Confucius and Lao, or sometimes to all three combined. Before one of the latter I noticed a group of pregnant women bowing and offering prayers for their unborn children.

I have said that there is no fixed religion in Vietnam. Speaking very generally, and admitting many exceptions, it could be that the more intellectual people are Buddhists or Confucianists. The lower the descent in the social scale, the nearer to primitive animism. The bulk of the population believes firmly in good and evil spirits, and employs traditional measures to attract the one and appease the others. Each house will have its own especial protective spirit, and each village its own god—very often some worthy of earlier days who served the village well. I would usually find a pagoda to Buddha, Confucius and a selection of others: then, alongside, a special altar for the local deity. There are ceremonies at the shrines on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, but otherwise the pagodas are put to secular uses. Often the adjoining



building is used as the communal hall and school: once I saw boys playing table tennis before the local shrine.

Apart from its pagodas, Hanoi is almost completely modern—part in the French Colonial style, the rest in local improvisations. Once, despite its casual growth, it doubtless had character: its shopping streets, now dilapidated, were devoted to artisans as well as merchants—one trade to a street. To-day you may still buy silk in the Rue de la Soie, but a hundred other things beside. Other streets retain traces of their old trades. One used to be devoted to doctors and chemists: and, if you mistrust X-rays and penicillin, you may still entrust your cure to the care of the local medicine man. Conveniently, just round the corner is a street where carpenters specialize in the production of coffins, plain and cheap or richly lacquered. Yet even the finest of these is only a temporary receptacle. After three years the body is dug up, the bones washed in scented water, and reinterred in a metal or earthenware box about two feet long by one foot square—you may buy one of these in any market-place. In the towns very practical considerations have confined burials to cemeteries, but in the open countryside you will find tombs scattered about, their sites determined by the village fortune-teller.

A funeral is a symphony in black and white—the bearers wear black conical hats instead of the conventional natural straw. There is usually music—even the poorest will afford a drum. The Vietnamese custom was to carry the body all the way to the grave, but now a Chinese fashion has grown in favour, and two ponies pull a small hearse. As a sign of modernity, I noticed that many mourners followed the coffin in *cyclo-pousses*, with their ragged propellants.

The Vietnamese of Tonkin are of the same stock as those of Annam and Cochin China, and speak the same language, if with a different accent. It was soon possible to notice other distinctions. The most noteworthy is that of colour. Instead of the smart white and black of the south, the people of the Red River delta prefer a drab reddish-brown, which looks very shoddy when the garment is old. I have mentioned their comparative poverty. This is partly due to the effects of the war, but life is always hard because of the pressure of overpopulation. Even in good years the yield of rice can scarcely



The Cao Dai  
Cathedral at  
Tay Ninh

Mois pupil



Recevoir	
1.1.23	10
1.1.5	10

\* Voici m  
 En voici  
 Celui-ci  
 Est mon  
 L'index qui  
 C'est la se co  
 Entre l'index  
 de majeur  
 d'annulair  
 Avec sa bague  
 de mariage  
 Marche à côté  
 Regardez les





Moïs warriors



Moïs woman sifting rice

sustain the local population, and it is necessary to import from the Mekong delta.

There are few industries, apart from utilities and the gradual exploitation of the local mineral resources. But the Orient has always been famous for its artisans, and this style of craftsmanship is still popular in Vietnam.

I went out to an artisan school at Hadong. Here young people were instructed in home industries—weaving, carpet-making, wicker work, pottery, metal work for household purposes, as well as the making of jewellery. I have already commented on the skill of the Vietnamese with their fingers. The instructor who showed boys and girls how to weave mats and baskets from slithers of bamboo exhibited to me with pride a picture of the Emperor, made out of the same unpromising medium. Then he demanded a photograph of me, and a week later I received a recognizable picture of myself in bamboo.

The school is an old foundation: it was destroyed by American bombers during the Japanese occupation, but was rebuilt by American generosity. Now it is doing more than educating the young. Peasants have much time on their hands: they work very hard at the periods of ploughing, sowing and reaping, but for months have little to do. Hence they are being encouraged to learn another trade, so that they can occupy their leisure profitably.

The desire for education is strong in Vietnam. Most town children now have some opportunity to learn—though the opportunities are not yet standardized, and town children still have a great advantage over those in the villages. Nor are the old people entirely neglected. They can learn to read and write at evening classes: and at Hanoi I saw classes of elderly market women taking their lessons during the heat of the day, when most other people enjoyed a siesta. They surely deserved to succeed.

### III

I had of course paid my courtesy calls. First on the Governor, Nguyen Tri, a man of dignified ability. He invited me to dinner in his palace, and it was served Chinese style. I do not pretend to be adept with chopsticks, but the food was delicious.



It included such delicacies as swallow's nest soup, shark's fin, mushrooms with crayfish fillings, and roast pigeon—including the head and the beak. This tit-bit completely defeated me.

My next call was on the Mayor, an energetic little man whose hospitality was also profound. When I admired a piece of local pottery in his room, he promptly presented it to me. Fortunately I had no such high opinion of the Town Hall.

The walls of both these officials' rooms were decorated with local lacquer. In Vietnam lacquer work does not mean dabbing a few gold leaves on a black background. The craftsmen are astute, and their products are works of art. I went to the school where youths and girls serve a long apprenticeship. After instruction in the use of their medium, they are required to draw and colour a full-sized picture: then they copy it in lacquer, on wood. The work was excellent, and I bought a picture executed by the prize pupil—which is likely to give me pleasure for many years.

Hanoi is also the seat of the Vietnam university. There is a branch college at Saigon, and university rank is planned for this as soon as circumstances permit. The establishment at Hanoi began as a medical school, but now has faculties of science, medicine, pharmacy and law. I saw students gaily dissecting human limbs—their owners were of course dead!—and was amazed at the mathematical ability of others. Genius in the theory of law did not surprise me—it is common in the East. Yet I was a little disappointed to find 600 law students against 400 of medicine: at Saigon the proportions were even worse. Vietnam needs lawyers, but any excess usually become disappointed politicians—not always the best leaders for a developing country.

"Work? I should say they do," said one of the professors: the staff is mixed, French and Vietnamese. "They apply their own self-discipline—they come here to *work*. Their capacity for memorizing is outstanding: understanding is a little more difficult—and important.

"Our numbers grow each year. At Hanoi and Saigon combined they number over 2,000. In addition, five or six thousand are studying in France, and a smaller number in other countries. So Vietnam ought not to lack an intelligentsia."

I went on to the École Française d'Extreme Orient, a branch

of a famous institution. Here I discussed with learned men the origin of the many peoples of Vietnam—and watched fascinated as an aged Vietnamese savant demonstrated the old script, Chinese fashion, using a pencil brush held upright. I would not care to write a book in that medium. It might take a lifetime.

Then to the museum: far finer than that of Saigon, with a wonderful display of the ancient cultures of Vietnam—statuary, jewellery and the other arts and crafts. The museum grew out of the university: before the war Hanoi was the intellectual capital of Vietnam, Saigon the commercial.

As a finale to my intellectual pilgrimage, I went with a Vietnamese friend to the theatre. Many of the presentations are affected by the Chinese style, and still more by the French—or, should I say, by the cinema, for there has recently been a vogue for pièces adapted from films.

My friend took me to see a genuine Vietnamese play, however. There were Chinese touches—a band, and the characters burst into song on the slightest provocation, raising the pitch of their voices as they did so. But otherwise the playing was far more natural. There was no expressionless and formal gestures: the girl did not simply bend her arms so as to indicate to the audience that she did not love her husband, but proposed to run away with the man next door. Further, the actors played a written piece, and did not improvise on a theme as they went along. The drama was simple—a disquisition in comedy form of the old quip, 'the woman pays'. There was one novelty. Before the last act the author appeared and made a speech. There had been a lot of controversy recently, he said, as to whether a man should take another wife if his first wife did not bear him a son. This play was his comment on the problem, and he hoped the audience would discuss it. They did—intermittently all through the play: the actors did not seem at all disturbed. There was no applause, but plenty of laughter at the right places.

And one pleasant touch: as I took my place, the man in the next seat shook hands.



## CHAPTER NINE

### RED RIVER DELTA

#### I

THE river really is red—a dull brown-red—since it carries thousands of tons of silt washed from the Thai valleys towards the sea.

The delta is second only to that of the Mekong for rice-growing. The region is triangular, with an apex of 120 miles on a base of 70. Yet in this small area are nearly 7,000 villages with a total population of 6,500,000. The soil is astonishingly fertile and, if the rains are normal, two crops a year can be gathered. Even this is insufficient for the overcrowded population, and in most years rice has to be transported from Saigon.

For my first excursion I accompanied a French press photographer to Haiphong, the port of the delta. The scene along the route was monotonous—nothing but swampy paddy fields, relieved every mile or so by a clump of trees which indicated the presence of a village. The local houses were not as prepossessing or tidy as those of the south: most had mud walls and thatched roofs, and were of the simplest possible design.

Every large village had its market. There would be two or three rows of stalls: for the rest, peasant women squatted by two baskets which they had carried on their *don ganh*, or split bamboo shoulder pole, bearing the produce of their holding. Their patience seemed inexhaustible. The time wasted in these markets must add up to millions of work-hours, but it is a local custom which no cry for 'efficiency' is likely to change. The market is a peasant club as well as a place of commerce. There is a market of sorts every day, but once a week vans will come from the nearest town to make a grander display.

At least one of the problems of the south is lacking: this is a region of peasant proprietors, and the big landlord is almost

unknown. But, alas, there is not enough land to go round, and tens of thousands of people eke out a precarious existence—helping men with larger holdings during the busy season, doing odd jobs, or fishing in the rivers or rice-swamps—there seems to be no lack of fish in any Vietnam water.

Many transactions in the market involved no money. A woman with a basket of rice would trade an agreed measure against the vegetables which another woman offered.

Practically everything was carried to market over the shoulder: even the pigs. One is seldom tempted to sentimental thoughts about pigs, but the local specimens prompted my sympathy. When a peasant considers that his pig is ready for market, he trusses it up with rope so that it cannot move a muscle—it cannot even squeal, for its mouth is tied. The idea is to keep it fresh until the last possible moment—for pork rapidly goes bad in a hot climate. So the pig's legs are bound to his body, and he becomes a black cylinder of flesh: then the peasant attaches him to his shoulder pole—with something dangling from the other end to balance—and carries him off to market.

The stalls were constructed of bamboo, with thatched roofs. I had to duck continually, since they were constructed for much smaller people. The bamboo is the utility plant of the north, as the palm is to the south. The stouter trunks form the framework of the houses: the leaves can be plaited into walls, as well as mats and baskets. Slithers are used for strong wicker work, and finer slithers serve as string.

A bamboo stem split down the middle forms the supple *don ganh*. It will carry thirty pounds or more at each end, sympathetically bending an inch or so in tune with the shuffling jogtrot of its bearer. When I tried to use it, my shoulder rapidly protested: and I found that even experienced coolies suffered from callouses or even deformations of shoulder bones.

The markets offer little for children. There may be sweets, but they are shockingly expensive—ten shillings a pound for the cheaper varieties. As a substitute, however, a child may acquire a foot of sugar cane at a more reasonable price.

Without being at all forthcoming, the village people were usually friendly enough if approached with patience and a smile. Examination of their houses confirmed my impression that



economic standards were lower here than in the south. Furniture consisted of a rough table and chairs, and the cooking-pots were few and simple—the diet seldom varies. If the cottage is large enough, there will be a bed, with a wicker mat as mattress. Otherwise jute hammocks are favoured.

In this part of the delta two crops are possible. The rice plants were already a foot high, and looked healthy: but the peasants regarded the heavy skies with apprehension. The Great Rains seemed to have begun a month earlier than usual and in places the rice was beaten down like English wheat after a thunderstorm.

In other fields, not yet sown, peasants were taking advantage of the rains to do their ploughing. The first essential was a few inches of water to cover the surface of the field, enclosed within a little mound. Sometimes the rain provided this without effort: sometimes, in its aberrations, it would swamp one field while leaving the next almost dry. Then the peasant set to work to transfer water from one to the other. His method made the Egyptian *shadoof* almost modern in comparison. He took a large wicker scoop, with a long handle, suspended it from a tripod of bamboos, and with rhythmic strokes shovelled the water over the enclosing mound. If two people were available, they used a closely woven basket of a different shape, and for hours on end dipped it in the water and flung its contents on to the adjoining field.

The peasant favoured a clumsy wooden plough, pulled by a buffalo, which plodded through the mud and water with most deliberate tread. If a peasant could not afford or borrow a buffalo, he used a hoe. In many villages, however, there is a strong sense of community: customs vary from village to village, and in some the buffaloes and ploughs are communally owned, their use being directed by the Council of Notables.

## II

I saw one of these councils in action.

"This is the most peaceful spot in the delta," said the mayor of the little town of Son Tay, near the western apex of the delta. At that moment a battery of artillery opened fire a few yards

off. "Of course, it is not very peaceful five kilometres away," he added, hurriedly.

Yet the atmosphere was serene enough at the village of Tung Thien. It was the nearest I had seen in the north, but it was not picturesque. There was, however, the semblance of a village green, bounded by the school, the shop, and the community house—a large building, without walls, but inevitably containing a large altar.

Here the village council awaited me: a dozen men, nearly all old, in their best clothes—black mandarin robes over white trousers. There was much ceremonious bowing, with natural dignity, as they served tea in little glasses.

But, naturally, I did not wish to disturb their meeting. A younger man sat by me and explained its details. There was a long discussion on the state of the narrow lane to a satellite hamlet: it was eventually agreed that half a dozen men should be instructed to do their monthly compulsory labour in clearing off the worst of the mud—villagers have little ready money, and prefer to work rather than to pay local taxes. Other village problems were tabled, and most earnestly discussed.

The village is the most democratic unit in all Vietnam. "The law of the king gives place to the custom of the village," runs an old saying, and in many respects it is still true. The Council of Notables is the intermediary between the state and the villages in all transactions.

With the country divided by war, national elections under the new constitution have not yet become possible. But the village councils have always been selected by the people. The choice is generally conservative. In Vietnam there is no virtue in being rich, but as in most parts of the East, there is a great respect for intellect and learning—a retired savant or schoolmaster who settles in a village is treated with great respect, and usually becomes the acknowledged authority on local or personal problems.

But now the council adjourned, and the Notables led me along the path discussed to a hamlet a few hundred yards away—it is common for a village to have several satellites. Here the community house had been burned down by the Viet Minh: only its ceremonial entrance porch remained, its walls defaced by crude lettering.



"The Viet Minh scrawled their slogans on the walls, so we washed them off and substituted our own," was the simple explanation.

Close by was the most remarkable pagoda I had yet seen in Vietnam. At least five centuries old, it consisted of a series of shrines, in the charge of a *bonzesse*, or lady monk. One altar had at least sixty Buddhas, in various attitudes. Others featured Confucius and some local gods, all with fierce and startling 'defenders'—immense and colourful statues of warriors in old-time costumes. One grotto, with dozens of small figures, gave a realistic representation of heaven and hell. One figure bore a remarkable likeness to Sir Winston Churchill in his younger days: I am glad to say that he was perched in the right section of the diorama: in fact, he appeared to be flying without wings, a surprising feat for a man of his bulk.

After more refreshments, I took my leave in an orgy of bows, and with a very pleasant taste in my mouth. So long as there is confidence and progress in the villages, the prospects of Vietnam will be bright. Most of the big cities are excrescences: 80 per cent of the population lives in villages, the real heart of the country.

A neighbouring village was famous for its pottery. There was nothing artistic about it—the pots were needed for everyday use. The potters were all women. A girl squatted by a wheel at floor level, and threw on its centre a lump of thick mud. She turned the wheel occasionally and awkwardly with her foot, and her skilful fingers guided the clay into its useful shape. Her repertoire consisted of four different types, large and small: with these a house could be supplied with water and cooking utensils. The nearby oven was as simple as the wheel.

The latter, it seemed to me, was a little too primitive. Tradition is often praiseworthy, but there are many types of potters' wheels propelled far more easily than this. I made a note to say a word to the Artisan School at Hadong.

My final visit on this journey was to a pumping station. I heard a familiar story—the Viet Minh had pillaged and ruined three of its great pumps, but these had now been replaced by American machines, and the station was again in full operation. It pumps water from the Red River into a canal, which in turn

serves innumerable ditches. Thus it irrigates 10,000 hectares of fertile land. It is in operation only from January until the rainy season begins, but its pumping enables the region to grow the precious second crop every year.

"Are the people grateful?" repeated the Vietnam engineer in charge of the station. "I wonder! At least I think they are, but in the East things are accepted too easily. At least I am grateful. I am Vietnamese, it is understood? But I know that it was the French who constructed this station, and so benefited tens of thousands of people. Incidentally, it was the French who trained me to direct it. So here is this triumph of civilization, created by the French, but now the property of Vietnam state and people. That deserves gratitude, does it not?"

But real gratitude is one of the rarest of human feelings, and is too easily banished by hatred. As I left Son Tay peasants were hurrying home. Sentinels on the periodic watch towers were preparing for their nightly vigil. I hurried, too, for the roads are closed to all traffic when daylight fades. In the delta everything stops at night: except the Viet Minh.

### III

It will be noted, and needs emphasis later, that I can scarcely mention even the most pacific pursuit in the delta without some reference to the war.

I went out to a village beyond Bac Ninh, to the north of Hanoi. The town itself had been battered by American bombers during the Japanese occupation; rebuilt, it was then sacked by the Viet Minh. The village at which I halted had been attacked during the night. It was, however, stoutly defended by its local militia—with its satellite hamlets it numbered a population of 2,000, of whom 375 men were armed. They were well armed, too, and the village was defended by barbed wire and strong points. Not all villages are as fortunate. I saw one where the guards carried ancient cutlasses—one preferred a long iron spike. However, they all wore yellow armlets, which would doubtless frighten the Viet Minh.

The night's attack had occasioned no casualties in the village:



any the Viet Minh had suffered had been carried away, but there were plenty of traces of blood. In a previous raid they had lost 40 killed.

No one in the scattered village and its subsidiary hamlets seemed very concerned. After seven years of it, war was now accepted as part of the routine of life. I wandered casually along the narrow muddy paths which served as streets—narrow, since the widest thing which ever traverses them is a buffalo. The village headman chattered cheerfully of the night's excitement.

"We were not always so lucky," he said. "Once they got right through our wire, and burned and pillaged. In one cottage a whole family was burned alive."

But on this occasion I had come not to study the miseries of war, but to see a village at work. The headman led me over a bricked courtyard into a house with brick walls and a thatched roof. It had three sizeable rooms, the middle one dominated by the large altar of the family deity. The beds were as simple as ever, but there were two or three pieces of furniture, and even a picture.

"Yes, this is the house of a rich peasant," said the headman. "He owns two hectares of land, so he lives very well."

It seemed strange to regard a man with five acres as rich, but it is true that in the delta area such a man can indeed live well, by local standards. The women of the house wore plenty of jewellery: the storehouse was substantial: poultry ran about the yard, and two families of pigs yelled for more provender: while in a substantial corral lazed a buffalo. I was glad that it was substantial, for as I neared him I saw a 'Let me get at him' look in his eyes.

"And now a poorer peasant," I suggested. He led the way to one of the hamlets.

"Often a hamlet or village will consist of people of one religion," he explained. "The village is Buddhist"—though this term often includes a mixture of every Oriental religion from Buddhism to animism—"but this hamlet is Catholic."

This was obvious as soon as I entered the first house, for the altar was replaced by very primitive and gory pictures of the Crucifixion. The house had bamboo and mud walls, and contained a single room with a lean-to shack for a kitchen.

Its furnishings were of the simplest—there was not even a chair.

The headman presented me to the peasant. "This man owns only one-third of a hectare," he explained.

Less than one acre! "And he can live on that?" I exclaimed.

"He can support a family of four on that, very simply. He does some fishing as well—you will have noticed that every hamlet—sometimes every house—has its pond. In Vietnam, where there is water there are fish. So he does not do too badly. Occasionally he will get a little work for real money—on the roads, or something like that. So he does not grumble: after all, he is a free man."

In the next village, less than a mile away, was a famous pagoda, he said. I suggested that we should walk over, but life in the delta is not as simple as that. A guard must be organized, for the frequent raids proved that the Viet Minh had local sympathizers. With half a dozen of the local militia fore and aft we walked along the top of the tiny dykes, getting very muddy in the process.

The pagoda was certainly interesting. The attendant bonze explained that the best Buddha was missing—it was made of brass, so the Viet Minh had taken it to melt down for munitions. His own quarters contained no less than three altars, one displaying effigies representing three of his ancestors.

Again I was offered light refreshments. The peasant generally has meals twice a day—at breakfast, and about 4 p.m. If he is working in the evening, he will add a bowl of soup later on. Rice is his mainstay, with any vegetables available, occasional fish, and very little meat. It is far from being a balanced diet, but it seems to suit the needs of the people, who are tough and strong. They are well adapted to their climate and circumstances: it is only recently that Vietnamese have been persuaded to work in mountain areas—and most of the mountain tribes absolutely refuse to descend to the plains.



## CHAPTER TEN

### BAY OF DRAGONS

#### I

"**H**ERE be Dragons," the old cartographers marked on their maps when they had an empty space to fill in. They would have been delighted had they heard of the Baie d'Along, which seemed to confirm their announcements.

With a Vietnam friend I journeyed again to Haiphong. Then a road to the north led us by a hilly route between the mountains and the sea. Occasionally it descended to a river or an inlet: then ferries were provided, growing more primitive as we progressed.

In the delta area it is difficult to make exact calculations from a map. Useless to say: "We have only twenty miles to go: even allowing for bad roads, we shall be there in an hour." You are right to make allowance for bad roads, but it is even more essential to allow for the ferries. Some can carry three vehicles, some only two—and you may find yourself at the tail of a queue.

This has led to a battle for 'priorities'. Military vehicles admittedly have first rights: the rest are disputed. When everybody seeks some form of priority, the word becomes meaningless. I was reminded of the first days of September 1939, when nearly every vehicle in London claimed precedence on some pretence, often absurd, and in any case quite unnecessary. I liked the outlook of the driver who chalked 'No priority whatsoever' on his lorry: and the wit of the man who plastered on his windscreen a poster with the startling legend, 'Secret Service'.

There were four ferries ahead of us, and the journey of less than fifty miles from Haiphong took four hours. The rough line of delimitation between Vietnam and Viet Minh lay only a few miles to the west—I could scarcely understand why the rebels had not attempted to seize the coastal flank.

Approaching the final ferry, the road mounted the crest of a ridge, and I had a sudden view of the Baie d'Along. I gasped in amazement. The calm waters were littered with sampans, their brown sails ribbed like bats' wings. There must have been hundreds of them within the view, for the sea is rich in fish.

Yet I gave the sampans no more than a passing glance, for the glory of the bay is its islands. I do not know if they have ever been counted, but there must be several thousand of them studded about the scene. Some rise vertically out of the water to a height of a couple of hundred feet, their grey rock half covered with shrubs or even small trees, hanging on doggedly wherever their roots can get a hold in the earth-filled interstices. Other islands are like steep cones, the rock shading to a rough point: others tiny. Some resemble craggy eminences surmounted by feudal castle ruins: others the sugar-loaf shapes of the fairy-tales. All were liberally clothed in green, which gave a general uniform of similarity to their casual medley of irregularity. It was an amazing, lovely spectacle.

We ferried over to Hon Gay, and hastened to find a sampan to sail the bay. The boat was crude, its central section covered with a semi-circular awning of plaited bamboo straw: this was the crew's home.

There were two men aboard: they used the sail cleverly to catch every breath of the gentle breeze. When this failed, they rowed, facing forward—one at the bow, one at the stern.

The sampan carried us in and out among the fringe of islands skirting the coast—it continues for twenty miles or more. As each island was passed, a new vista of beauty was revealed—different from the last, though of the same type. Occasionally the cliffs broke to reveal grottoes: the boatmen wanted to halt while we explored them, but who would immerse himself in a cave when such glories awaited him without? Once, however, we sailed through a hole in the rocks to find ourselves on a tiny lake which formed the centre of the island.

Now the sampan scudded across the bay before the breeze. About four miles from the coast is another fringe of islands, as fascinating as the first. A poet might do justice to the Bay of Along: most artists have so far failed. Their approach has been too stiff and formal. Usually the islands are seen through



a light haze or denser cloud, with a mystique difficult to transfer to canvas. Only a few Chinese artists, painting on silk, have really captured the charm of these misty isles. Nor is the beauty of Along to be found in individual islands. It is essential to visualize the broad sweep of the lovely sea, with the myriad islands set like an enclosing bracelet of gems.

The men of the sampan worked their way with great skill through the narrow channels—some only a few yards wide. For an hour or more my friend and I were silent, overcome with the wonder of it all. I would gladly have spent weeks exploring this amazing scene. The water was so still that even a canoe could have traversed it without danger.

Were the Baie d'Along more accessible from Europe or America, it would have millions of visitors a year. I can think of no other spot which even approaches its beauty. At present it is completely unspoiled: there is but the one hotel for the occasional visitor—not one Vietnam resident in a thousand has ever seen this fairest portion of the realm. And no ambitious entrepreneur has yet thought of introducing speed boats to replace the leisurely sampans, which fit the scene so exactly. I heard, however, that a Haiphong shipping firm proposes to run day trips by steamer from the port.

The sun promised a red setting, and we climbed a hill on the mainland. The scene was incredibly beautiful, as the red rays illumined the waters in their own glorious shades. Then, as the sun descended behind the mountains at our back, the bases of the island disappeared in the gloom, with only the tips of their rocks gleaming pink for a few precious moments, like miniature blushing Dolomites. Then the sun had gone, and with the brief tropical twilight the bay passed rapidly into complete darkness. Only later, by the light of the stars, did it reveal yet another aspect of its loveliness, with the islands rising like a horde of ghosts from the glassy sea.

The Bay of Along means the Bay of the Dragon—the earth dragon, not the other kind which frequent the sea or the sky. There are people who believe in its name. Its sea serpent has been seen as often as any Loch Ness monster. I can guarantee no dragons, but I am confident that any visitor will confirm my ranking of Along as among the natural wonders of the world.

## II

We continued along the road to the north, which left the coast and plunged into wooded country—the medley of trees even included pines. Small herds of buffalo grazed: they were of a different breed from those of the delta, kept for their milk rather than transport services.

Then another surprise awaited us. It was as if the Bay of Along had now transferred itself to the land. On all sides arose the now familiar islands, but now a green valley was their bed instead of the sea. Evidently the whole region was once like this, until the ocean invaded the greater part of it.

A little town came in sight, with a touch of the Far West about it in its mixture of modernism and primitive improvisation. This was Cam Pha, the site of one of the most remarkable coal mines in the world.

The concession for its operation was allocated to a French company. It has built its outpost town with about 30,000 inhabitants, of whom one-third work in the mine—or, to be precise, mines, for that at Cam Pha itself is only the largest in a series.

An engineer took us in a jeep up a rough mountain road. He explained that the top of the mountain had been hacked away to reveal the coal to the open sky. Then he halted on the edge of the biggest black hole ever known.

It was like an enormous quarry: or perhaps a dusky Roman theatre, with its terraced sides. Never was the actual work of coal-getting so simple. Little trucks ran along the terraces, and workers had merely to hack out the coal and fill them.

The seam already exposed is 100 metres wide and 30 metres thick. It is estimated that it descends for another 80 metres. British miners, struggling below ground to follow their eighteen-inch seams, or occasionally wallowing in the comparative luxury of a five-foot vein, might like to sit back and consider a seam 370 feet thick, at least 20 miles long—and accessible from the open air.

The seam has been tapped at half a dozen points—always by blasting away surface rocks. There are no pits, but some galleries bore directly into the mountainsides.



"The miners do not object to the tunnels?" I asked.

"No. Why should they?"

"I read that, when the mine was first projected, the men objected to pits and tunnels, lest they should disturb the earth dragons."

"Well, if that were true then, it isn't now. They are too interested in football and the cinema to worry about dragons."

The miners were a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese—the latter drawn from all over the country. Pay begins at 25 piastres a day for the novice, rising to 65 piastres a day as he becomes skilled—the average pay for the 2,000 men and women employed at this is 40 piastres a day. In addition, each miner receives three pounds of rice a day for himself and his family. As the minimum wage established by the government is 23 piastres a day, these rates are fairly generous.

"But they could earn a good deal more," said the engineer. "Piece work rates are applied to the coal getting, but are not the expected inducement. These Chinese and Vietnamese aren't lazy—they can work very well. The trouble is, they have no ambition. When they think they have earned enough for the day, they pack up and go home.

"Think of it: the average European miner, working narrow seams underground, raises about 1,000 to 1,200 kilogrammes a day. These men, working under ideal conditions, raise only 300 to 400 kilogrammes. Why, if we could have a batch of your British miners here, they would raise 10,000 kilogrammes a day without straining themselves—20,000 a day if they went all out.

"Another trouble is that so few of these men make a career of mining. When they have worked here for a couple of years, they can have saved enough to go home and buy a farm. Or some of them go to town and spend their savings in riotous living, and then come back for another spell!

"Yes, trade unions are legal in Vietnam, but haven't made much headway among the miners. Of course, we pay well above the minimum rates, which may explain the comparative ease of our labour situation. We would gladly pay more—if we got the additional production.

"No, Viet Minh have made few efforts in this direction. They never actually occupied the coast—you can go right along



Moïse girl—  
available for marriage!



The "Educator". In the back-  
ground, a "Long House"



Wash day in Vietnam





Ploughing in the rice swamps



Planting out rice

it to Hon Cay, on the Chinese frontier. In fact, as China and Vietnam are not officially at war, the frontier is still open!

"The Viet Minh have made a few raids in the past, but there is of course a military force defending the region. And we have a squadron of armed police to look out for sabotage and the like. So far they've had precious little to do."

It was difficult to imagine why Viet Minh had not made a determined effort to occupy the region. They are short of funds, and the coal of Cam Pha could easily replenish their exchequer.

The French officials appeared quite confident, however, and are going ahead with the exploitation of the coal. I saw bulldozers at work moving one spur of the mountain, which would reveal yet another section of the giant seam. There is no limit to the possibilities—not for a couple of hundred years, anyway. A railway conveys the coal to Cam Pha Port, a few miles north, where it is exported—not only to Vietnam, but as far away as Japan.

The coal is anthracite. "Not quite as good as yours in South Wales," the engineer explained, "and more friable. But I will show you another part of the seam which is harder, and which is near to Cardiff standards."

The production, beginning with 2,000 tons a year in 1890, has now reached an annual total of two million tons. This figure is small by European or American standards, but important in South-East Asia. It could be doubled or trebled—especially if the China market opens again.

Yet I would make one plea to the Vietnamese government. When peace is established, it proposes a policy of industrialization. But *not*, I hope, at Cam Pha. The coal is easily carried to all parts of the country, and the existing cities are surely more convenient than would be the necessity of building new towns here. It is always cheaper to transport the coal to well-sited industrial centres than to carry the finished products to distant customers. My anxiety is æsthetic. Cam Pha borders the Bay of Along—the mine itself commands a magnificent view of its myriad islands: and it would be a crime to deface its calm beauty with smoky chimneys.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### THE RICE WAR

#### I

I now approach my most difficult task—to make the delta war against Viet Minh comprehensible or even credible.

"Forget every other war," advised a colonel of the Foreign Legion. "There is no front line. Or any other line."

The situation is certainly difficult for any European soldier to comprehend. Some Yugoslavs might understand, but a better comparison might be made with the Greek Communist rebels. They had their army, occupying a northern area: they had sympathizers resident or infiltrated in many cities: they were supported from abroad, and could easily retire to Yugoslavia when hard pressed. Similar conditions, allowing for differences of geography, apply in Tonkin; but so do a dozen others.

In 1950 the French appeared likely to lose the delta and Hanoi. Then General de Lattre de Tassigny took the field, and his impetus and genius restored the situation. Not merely was he a good strategist—he imbued his men with confidence, the first essential to military success.

He cleared the bulk of the Viet Minh forces from the delta, and set up a line of forts to defend it. Every five hundred yards or so is a strong-point, with reserves rapidly available to support its garrison. Further, every fort has adequate artillery cover. The French use their artillery very effectively, and experience has proved that the Viet Minh do not care for it.

There is no question of a continuous trench line—such would require an army of a million men for the northern delta alone, and the total French army in Indo-China amounts to less than a quarter of that. So the space between the forts is open, and here peasants till their fields by day. By night all movement is forbidden. But of course this regulation can be and is flouted

without great difficulty. The most active system of patrols could not prevent enemy infiltration.

The first essential of the situation, then, is a long line of forts which can more or less seal the delta by day, though it can never hope to do so at night: the forts can prevent people from passing along a road, but not from crossing it. There is indeed a constant traffic in and out of the delta: nor is this all.

Once the delta came under French-Vietnam 'control', Viet Minh activity was confined to the work of local sympathizers. At first this was desultory, but now they are organized into a Viet Minh militia—a kind of Home Guard in reverse. Becoming bolder, the rebels infiltrated whole battalions of regular troops into the delta region. They were fully armed and had uniforms—but hid these save when on actual operations: otherwise they passed as peasants in an easy 'disguise', since many of them, including a large proportion of local men, *were* peasants.

Such activities *within* the French zone obviously involve a degree of complicity among the local population. A Viet Minh battalion, however disguised, cannot exist in a neighbourhood save by the knowledge and aid of a large number of people. Some of these may be Viet Minh supporters: others are afraid.

"What would you?" asked a man who admitted that in the past he had given supplies to Viet Minh. "They come and ask for half your store of rice. If you refuse, they kill you and take *all* your rice. What would you do?"

A student with whom I talked in the market at Haiphong exclaimed: "So you are English!" in a loud voice at least once every two minutes.

"I am sorry to appear so stupid," he exclaimed, much more conversationally.

"What is it—fear?"

"Yes. If a Viet Minh agent—and there are hundreds in the town—saw me talking to a Frenchman, he might denounce me as a traitor."

The young man scarcely realized what he had done. I spoke to hundreds of Vietnamese without reserve: but this student, by emphasizing that I was English, revealed that there were Viet Minh agents within earshot—and that he knew who they *were*.

He was, alas, typical of hundreds of thousands. *Attentisme*



is a French name given to an ancient Oriental failing. It is important, not to be on the right, but on the winning side. Far too many Vietnamese are sitting on the fence, waiting to see which side is likely to be master. This attitude has such serious effects on the situation that we must discuss it later at length.

"You must not blame me," said the young man, as if reading my thoughts. "The point is that the government cannot protect me against Viet Minh agents."

This was true. And he was right in assuming that there *were* agents in Haiphong—the city is a minor rebel stronghold in the delta war. Earlier in the day I had asked the way to Kien An. Now the Vietnamese has the most appalling sense of direction I ever encountered, coupled with an amazing topographical knowledge. If he is very intelligent he will admit that he doesn't know, but more usually he waves his hand casually in the direction he happens to be facing. It may not be the one you want, but it will get you and your embarrassing conundrums out of his way. Should you doubt him, he will shrug his shoulders and leave you to get information elsewhere.

But, while I questioned a small group by the waterside at Haiphong, a little man pushed his way through. Yes, he knew Kien An, he said. In fact, he would get on my jeep and take me there.

Now this was amazing. So far no Vietnamese had shown the hundredth part of such interest in my wanderings. One suspicion prompts another: he wore the poorest of peasant clothes, but spoke good French—and had a town hair-cut. As I was reaching the reasonable conclusion that he was a Viet Minh agent or a soldier on leave, he seemed to sense the meaning of my hesitation to accept his offer, and disappeared into the crowd.

"You were quite right," said a security officer, later. "Almost certainly he was a Viet—and he would have led you straight into their lines. That might have been an interesting experience for you, but there would have been the hell of a row over the loss of a jeep."

## II

The delta war is a *real* war: far more deadly, say, than the

campaign in Malaya, where the Communist rebels are far fewer in numbers.

My visit to Kien An, with a French press photographer, was to record an incident of the war a few evenings earlier. A Viet Minh battalion 'with some connivance from the local population', as the French communiqué admitted, attacked an important ammunition dump at Kien An. The garrison defended the dump boldly, and 190 of the assailants were killed and 76 taken prisoner. But mortar shells began falling within the enclosure: one of them touched off an explosion, and thousands of tons of ammunition were lost.

Every night produced its incidents. I spent one in a post north of Hanoi. An hour before dawn a fusillade of bullets struck the little fort: they did no damage, only a lucky shot through one of the loopholes could have harmed the defenders. These responded vigorously. True, they could not see their enemy, and their rapid fire may have been designed as much to keep up their own courage as to frighten their assailants. It was a very noisy little battle, and to me, a man of peace, rather exciting. But the communiqué merely referred to 'harassing fire on many of our posts in the northern sector'.

Other posts were not so lightly treated—I rushed out to them at the first reports of attack, but usually arrived too late. In one, near Ninh Giang, 82 Viet Minh were killed. I can bear witness to the accuracy of the French communiqués, for I counted the bodies myself. The previous night a local garrison killed 60 of the enemy and took 200 prisoners. Then the French raided 25 kilometres into Viet Minh territory south of the delta, capturing 2,000 mines and 48 mortars.

Yet war is never an unmixed record of success. In the same week the Viet Minh launched a vigorous attack on a camp near Nam Dinh, again with 'the complicity of the population'. The camp housed 350 Vietnamese recruits who had been in the army for precisely a fortnight, and were not even armed. They were kidnapped and carried off into rebel territory. There they would be subject to an intense process of propaganda, with a view to persuading them to fight for their captors.

Such incidents and skirmishes are the routine of the delta war—the incidents I have mentioned form only a few of those reported in a single week. It will accordingly be seen that this



is a *real* war, even though its character may be unconventional. Following the normal practice, the French never disclosed their own losses, but it can be guessed that they were considerable.

It is important to realize that several of these battles took place on territory nominally controlled by the French—though I have pointed out that this control ceases at nightfall. I have recorded my visit to a village north of Bac Ninh which had been attacked during the night. The defenders—the local militia—were certain that they had inflicted casualties: they had heard cries of pain. In the morning we found traces of blood, and a patrol followed them for a mile: then they suddenly ceased. Here, evidently, the wounded had been given attention. But the direction of the traces appeared to be significant.

"I thought as much," said the village headman. "The Ninety-nine Peaks."

He indicated a small group of hills about five miles away. "Viet Minh control the region," he said. "It would be suicide to enter the hills with a small patrol. This is a job for the Legion."

I hurried to a neighbouring hill, crowned by a Dominican monastery. This had been damaged by American bombers, and now served as the headquarters of the 5th Regiment of the Foreign Legion. Here was held a reserve for posts along the assumed border of Viet Minh territory.

"Oh, yes, there are many regions which we do *not* control," the colonel said. "The Ninety-nine Peaks area is one." He readily agreed that I should join the patrol now being organized. "But don't expect any excitement," he warned. "They will be expecting us."

This could mean an attempted ambush, though our little force of armoured cars and half-tracks was formidable enough. But there was no ambush. The first village we encountered was completely deserted: so was the second. A hurried search of the simple houses revealed no arms of any kind.

"It's always the same," grumbled a German sergeant. "Fighting against an enemy who is never there. I'd like to burn the place down, but they'd only build another. I wonder how the Russians would treat a situation like this?"

"I can tell you that," said the Hungarian driver of our

armoured car. "I've seen them at work. If this area were so much as suspected, the Russians would surround it and hold all the people."

"But suppose they couldn't catch them?"

"They would occupy the villages and starve the people into surrender. Then they would transfer the whole lot to some region in Asia where they couldn't do any harm, and re-settle this area with Estonians, or some other unfortunates. Oh, yes, the Russians would know how to deal with a case like this."

(But when later I mentioned this solution to the colonel of the Foreign Legion, his eyes twinkled: "Oh, yes, it would be very effective. But what would your *New Statesman* have to say about it?")

We spent a couple of hours in the enemy territory, but, as the colonel had prophesied, saw no excitement. However, the evacuation of the villages had not been quite complete, and the German sergeant in some miraculous fashion acquired a couple of cockerels.

"Come to dinner in *our* mess to-night," he invited. "Give the officers' a miss. They won't mind—they're a good lot. It isn't their fault they're not allowed to be tough."

So I dined in the sergeants' mess—an excellent meal, and very civilized, complete with serviettes and tooth-picks.

### III

The facilities which the French offer the war correspondents were very good. The press camp at Hanoi was reasonably comfortable, with good communications, by cable, to all parts of the world: the censor lived on the premises, and was very moderate. Jeeps were provided to convey correspondents to any part of the delta at short notice: correspondents might take part in patrols, or stay at isolated forts—at their own risk, of course. And, as I shall show, they could fly almost at will to French centres *behind* the Viet Minh lines.

The correspondents were a mixed lot. They included no British representatives—though later I met in Laos James Fawcett, a very capable Australian, who covered South-east Asia for Reuter. There were half a dozen Frenchmen and two



Vietnamese. When I arrived, the American press had three representatives on the scene, but the excitement of the invasion of Laos quickly attracted more. They were a mixed crowd, from junior reporters to journalists of vast experience such as Larry Allen, of Associated Press. ("It's easy to talk about scoops, and not difficult to get them. But a correspondent's duty is to keep fairly near one end of a line of communication. What's the use of a scoop if you can't get it home?")

I spent many hours with John Dowling, of *Time* and *Life*. He had been their South-east Asia expert for fifteen years, and had studied not only the politics of that region, but its peoples. How his papers reduced his erudite reports to their snappy paragraphs must remain one of the mysteries of modern popular journalism.

At 7.30 each evening a French officer brought in the day's communiqué, and went over it with the aid of a large-scale map. On important occasions a more senior member of the General Staff was available for interrogation. Generally the tone was very moderately cautious: there was no attempt at dramatics, or at pretence that a local success was a major victory—or at disguising a defeat.

Then the typewriters began to click, as correspondents raced to 'file' their despatches. With the day's work done, dinner was usually convivial.

Yet it seemed to me that the evening briefing was the weak point in an otherwise excellent information service. Few soldiers have any comprehension as to what is news. Often the French officer would confine his report to the main operations, ignoring the gallant defence of a post which was of greater 'human interest' news value. During the war we found the solution: that it was easier to make pressmen into soldiers than soldiers into pressmen: hence sub-editors were commissioned and rapidly trained, then used to deal with men of their own line of thought. It would repay handsome dividends to the French if they brought out a first-class editor in uniform, and put him in charge of their news service. They have done this on the civilian side, with excellent results.

No one pretended to see far ahead. A military decision seemed almost impossible. In numbers the opposing forces are probably just about equal, but the French-Vietnam equipment

is overwhelmingly superior. The Viet Minh have no aircraft, only light flak, no artillery except mortars, and no armour. The French can drive through enemy territory at will, but they are nervous about their communications—not without good reason. The greater part of the Viet Minh area is mountainous, admirably suited for ambushes. Using ruthless methods, the French generals could probably subjugate a larger area, but they are fighting under two severe handicaps. It would be impolitic to apply draconian measures when the real objective is to woo the population towards the government and away from Viet Minh. And any general who suffered a high rate of casualties would immediately be recalled to Paris. This political direction is a blunder. Often a unit will incur ten casualties in striving to avoid one.

The defensive policy has passed the initiative to the Viet Minh. Far more than half the French-Vietnam army is cooped up in defensive posts. Here they can be contained by a mere handful of the enemy, whose main forces are thus available for offensive action. In a straight fight the French nearly always win, but generally only small forces are involved. It could be claimed with confidence that, could both armies be ranged on the field in traditional style, not merely the battle but the war would be over in about half an hour.

And I noticed one point which could be of significance: the Viet Minh seldom attack unless they are locally in overwhelming strength.

#### IV

Despite their mastery of the skies, the French are woefully deficient in aircraft. A hundred sorties a day were regarded as extraordinary—and would need the local forces to be reinforced by aircraft from a carrier. Further, French posts inside the Viet Minh area have to be supplied entirely by air. The reserves of aircraft are so scanty that for special efforts the civilian services have to be raided: once I was actually on board when the machine was requisitioned for some emergency military duty. When, early in May, a dozen American 'flying box cars' arrived at Hanoi, they aroused great excitement—



especially as they were to be flown by American civilian pilots: they were, of course, to be used solely for transport purposes, and were unarmed. But even a dozen aircraft were classed as an important reinforcement.

The Viet Minh reply to superior strength is mobility—always an important military asset. Their lightly armed skirmishers are not bound to main roads, but can take to mountain or forest tracks—mostly well concealed from air observation. The French face the difficulties of the British and Americans in the Pacific campaigns—the cramping effects of superior European standards. A white soldier needs reasonable rations of accustomed type, or his fighting power is soon impaired. The Asiatic needs are more easily satisfied. The Viet Minh soldier, in his uniform of black or green, carries a thin sack, rather like an elongated sausage. This, filled with rice, he wears over his shoulder like a bandolier. It will carry three kilogrammes of rice—four days' rations. Thus a Viet Minh platoon can manœuvre freely for days, whereas Europeans require a lorry trailing after them.

Nevertheless, communications remain one of the Viet Minh difficulties. Food can be easily transported, but ammunition is quite another matter. Generally, lorries are available only on the supply routes from China—and these, of course, are not neglected by the French aircraft: these, however, are so inadequate that anything like a complete blockade is impossible. Further, the Viet Minh have large squads of coolies available for road repairs, and hack out new earth tracks or restore old ones with amazing speed.

In Annam the Viet Minh communications are more precarious. Short stretches of the railway are available, but the line is broken by the French hold on Hué. For mechanized transport the rebels largely depend on what happened to be in the region when they seized it. For the rest, they improvise. Bullock carts are slow but sure. Even *cyclos-pousses* are pressed into service—loaded with supplies and then pushed. And, for mountain operations, the Viet Minh impress thousands of coolies, who carry their burdens from shoulder poles.

As a precautionary measure, they are trying to double their communications in Annam, using a difficult mountain route. They are also active by sea—but so are the French. Hundreds of junks and thousands of sampans have been captured in naval

operations. Again, the French have not ships enough to institute a complete blockade, but they use their forces with verve. In the delta operations motor boats and landing craft often play an active part.

So do the Intelligence services of both sides. The explosion at Kien An and the kidnapping of a recruit company were due to lapses in the French-Vietnam organization. As often as not, warning of raids is available. The French of course have infiltrated some of their friends into Viet Minh forces—and Viet Minh is well represented within the government ranks.

The delta war is thus a virtual stalemate, with Viet Minh mobility countering French strength. Each side in turn gains local successes, but these have little or no effect on the course of the war. Even if the French-Vietnam forces were strong enough to drive the rebels from the northern territories, this might do no more than to provoke direct Chinese intervention—as did a similar situation in Korea. Or the Viet Minh forces might retire into China to recuperate and refit—as the Greek Communists used to do in Yugoslavia. The Greek war might still be in progress but for Tito's quarrel with Russia. Vietnam badly needs a Chinese Tito!

v

The bulk of Viet Minh military supplies now come from China. Their arms consist of (a) those taken from the Japs at their surrender. These include French munitions seized by the Japs in March 1945; (b) arms supplied by U.S.A. to the Chinese Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek, and later captured by the Communists—or, possibly, sold to the Communists by corrupt Nationalist generals; (c) supplies of Chinese manufacture.

There is little evidence of Russian aid. The only articles of Russian manufacture so far captured by the French have been two motor lorries and a quantity of medical stores.

Just as important as Chinese material aid is their supply of instructors. At least 6,000 of these are known to be with the Viet Minh battalions. Recent prisoners and refugees have reported that larger numbers have arrived, and that they are



not popular: China is the 'hereditary enemy' of Vietnam, and instructors with a subordinated army generally tend to be officious. But certainly the Chinese training has been effective: the Viet Minh guerrilla tactics are good. Since their sharp reverses in pitched battles they have adhered to correct guerrilla policy—a local attack here, followed rapidly fifty miles away by another.

Yet, in a war, such things are no more than irritations. The rebels evidently hope to wear down the French patience. Orientals have plenty of this quality: it is usual for them to sit down and hope that the enemy will defeat himself. When the struggle began, Ho Chi Minh prophesied a ten years' war. He has now achieved seven.

Yet, to win, he *must* recapture the northern delta. The economy of his territory is strained—for Chinese, Communist or otherwise, do not pretend to give something for nothing, and the lorries which bring military material carry back any mineral or other supplies available from Viet Minh resources. There are signs of food shortages: a bad harvest could do more than military action to disrupt Viet Minh plans.

I saw no signs to suggest that the conquest of the delta was likely. The French hold stoutly in difficult conditions, and the Vietnamese army is now steadily expanding. The most acute problem lies *within* the delta, with the Viet Minh infiltrated units and their militia. This is the most difficult situation for a European soldier of either war to understand. The peasant working knee-deep in the mud of the rice-fields by day may be an armed rebel by night—the smile he gives you would be replaced by a bullet. "If you see a man asleep during the day, it's a good bet that he's a Viet Minh, who has been out all night," declared an experienced security officer.

"And how would you deal with it?" I asked of an American correspondent who grumbled at the indecisive French policy.

"We should just make a police job of it. We should fingerprint everybody in the delta: then any man straying from his village without permission would be recognized as Viet Minh."

An admirably simple scheme: with one fault—that the number of police required to execute it would amount to at least ten times the total forces now available!

The local people accept the situation philosophically—the

closing of roads at night, the spasmodic attacks, a hundred restrictions which would cause intolerable impatience in Western Europe. Orientals are so accustomed to restrictions by governments or despots that they are accepted—or avoided.

"At any rate, we shall now have a short respite," said the headman of a delta village early in May.

"Why?"

"The rainy season begins soon."

"I see. Communications will be impossible?"

"Not so much that. But it is the rice-growing season as well. The Viet Minh will have to see to their own fields—they need every grain they can grow. And they want us to go ahead with our farming, too—so that they can come and steal our rice when we have harvested it. That will be in September. The war will probably begin again early in October."



## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE ISOLATED HEDGEHOG

#### I

WHEN the French had established at least a daylight control of the delta area, they pushed outwards into the mountains. There they adopted the same tactics—the establishment of a series of small fortified posts. The results were not the same, however; in the delta communications were good, and reinforcements could be at once rushed to any point threatened: further, a concentration of artillery could cover a dozen forts. In the mountains the posts were really isolated. The Viet Minh could pick them off one by one, attacking in overwhelming strength. So a new policy has been devised. Instead of being dispersed over a dozen small posts, the defenders were concentrated in one large centre, from which they could strike, and which depended essentially on an airstrip. Of these ‘hedgehogs’ the largest and most important is Na Sam.

It lies near Son La, across a main road, but otherwise in the middle of difficult mountain jungle country. To an ex-soldier of the first war its situation appears fantastic—it is 120 miles behind the Viet Minh ‘lines’, and is supplied entirely by air. At first established to cut enemy communications, it has now become a strong fort—and a symbol of French prestige.

It came into the news in the late autumn of 1952. Then the Viet Minh attacked in force for several weeks: at one point they did capture one outlying fort, but it was quickly recovered. In all, they suffered a severe defeat. Their total losses are not known, but the French buried 2,000 of their dead. Coming after a series of setbacks in the delta, this success was hailed in France, where Na Sam rose rapidly to fame.

I flew to the fort in a Bristol transport aircraft, sitting on a box of ammunition. The absence of heavy flak enables the French to fly almost at will—in the air, the weather rather than

the Viet Minh is the enemy. We soon left the delta and flew over jagged mountains, the jungle persisting to their crests. Then, suddenly, a broad valley revealed a smudge of red earth, with many signs of activity. We descended gently to the airstrip of Na Sam.

This inner fort area is five kilometres long by three wide. It is completely surrounded by barbed wire, minefields and other defensive devices, with strong points at all suitable places—an inner ring of forts. By themselves these would be inadequate, so the neighbouring heights have been fortified—ten or twelve of them. The jungle has been cut down to allow a field of fire—one mountain top has been completely stripped, its grey rock now contrasting markedly with the vivid green of the adjoining forests.

The troops live in dug-outs or shelters, but the nerve centres are completely underground. I waded through mud to see the staff rooms, radio installations, and the like. The centralized control ensures that the full weight of the fort's armaments can be directed against any point of attack. There is a strong force of artillery, but the mortars are perhaps more useful—they can toss their bombs *over* the mountains into the adjacent valleys.

The garrison numbers from ten to fifteen thousand men, according to the situation. In addition there are 1,500 Viet Minh prisoners employed on labour duties. These were *not* fanatical Communists: they had few if any political interests. "We get 700 grammes of rice a day, which is about double what we had as civilians in the delta," said one. "There are plenty of vegetables, and fish, and occasionally meat. This is not a bad way of waiting for the war to end." He resumed his task of chopping wood: I noticed that the group of prisoners was working without a guard. True, they would find it very difficult to get out of Na Sam!

The garrison includes some local men. This is Thai country, and a force has been enlisted—naturally, they are in great demand as guides. Others work as labourers. Outside the main camp, but within the outer circle of forts, are several Thai villages, where their families live. At times of threat they can be withdrawn to the shelter of the perimeter.

Aircraft touched down every quarter of an hour, and were rapidly unloaded: most made two or three trips a day: this



was a Berlin airlift in miniature. Everything has to be brought in, save water, of which the local supply is adequate, and more. I saw one ingenious shower-bath. A tiny stream, descending the mountain, was conducted by a split bamboo into a round can with nail punctures in its base, ensuring a continuous cold shower. Men of half a dozen races queued for a precious few seconds under its cleansing water.

The garrison was a synopsis of the Franco-Vietnam forces. There were French metropolitan troops, Vietnam regiments, units of the Foreign Legion, and Algerians, Moroccans and Senegalese. Morale was very high: it usually is among troops nearest to the enemy: defection flourishes most in distant bases.

There are few slack times. Since the defensive victory of 1952, work has been intense, and Na Sam is at least twice as strong as then. It is doubtful if Viet Minh will risk another attack—the outstanding French hope is that they might!

## II

"Would you like to go out with a patrol?" asked a staff officer. "At your own risk, of course," he added hurriedly, in case I raised any question of indemnity.

He offered me a choice. Some patrols would leave soon after dusk and would penetrate far in Viet Minh territory, returning by nightfall the following day—unless they chanced on anything 'interesting'; an enemy concentration, for example. If so they would watch it, while sending radio messages to bring reinforcements or an aerial attack. Other patrols would be more local, to ensure that there had been no Viet Minh infiltrations.

My choice was easy. I was in fair condition for a heavy-weight, but I doubted if I could keep up for twenty or thirty miles through wild jungle country with these tough Moroccan Goums. And I should hate being a handicap—and even more concerned if I had to be left behind! So I chose the local patrol.

It set off at the unearthly hour of 2 a.m. The troops were Vietnamese, and though they had spent their lives in the delta flats, they seemed acclimatized to the mountain jungle. I do not see too well in the dark, so I was careful to keep in touch.

The darkness was intense—the jungle is so dense that even in daylight it is gloomy. At first we used rough but marked paths, keeping to the valleys. My only difficulty arose when we crossed a bridge over a small river—the bridge consisting of one rough log. With the assistance of my immediate neighbours, who held out their rifles as an aid in balancing, I got across. There was a slight delay at the far side, where the mud was deep. The soldiers wore boots, but I had only shoes, and one of them was forced off by the suction. We had a rare search before we found it and cleaned out most of its muddy contents.

(As a matter of psychological interest, we had to cross the same 'bridge' on our return journey the following morning. When I saw its narrow frailty—and the twenty-foot drop into the river below—I utterly refused to walk across it, as I had done in the dark. Instead, I sat down astride the log and shuffled myself forward a few inches at a time. I got across, but left numerous shreds of the seat of my trousers as relics of my epic passage.)

I have never been so vigilant. True, we might chance across a Viet Minh patrol, but we were just as likely to encounter a tiger or an elephant. It was unlikely that they would choose battle, however, and I was not unduly concerned. But I *was* apprehensive about snakes.

Now the patrol leader decided to make for a mountain top to await the dawn. We left the path, but a Thai guide led us without hesitation through the jungle. The noises were sometimes alarming, but at least served to cover the cracking of twigs beneath our feet.

We must have climbed a thousand feet: then a suitable observation post was found. Pickets went out a hundred yards to protect us against possible flanking attacks, and we waited for the dawn.

It came rapidly: dawn and twilight are very transient in these equatorial lands. One moment it was dark, five minutes later almost completely daylight, despite the low, dark clouds. The patrol leader looked long and earnestly through his glasses.

"Nothing," he announced. "Well, they will not attack now. They are not very fond of our artillery."

But then one of his men called excitedly—he had observed



movement in the branches of trees on the other side of the valley. The officer keenly directed his glasses.

"Monkeys!" he announced disgustedly, a moment later.

He called in the sentinels and we began to make our way home.

Later in the day one of the long-distance patrols came in to report one incident: they had encountered a small group of Viet Minh, and had killed two of them.

By this time I had enjoyed a good sleep. When I awoke I had another decision to make. I decided that my trousers would never be the same again—they were caked with red mud and torn by twigs: reluctantly I decided to abandon them.

### III

Fifty miles north-west of Na Sam is a second 'hedgehog', Lai Chau. This, too, is situated in wild country, but is perched on a mountain top! Otherwise it is a miniature Na Sam, supplied, of course, by air. Its units fight a strange war, where the jungle is neutral.

It is designed to maintain a link with the Thai tribes, among whom the Chinese rather than the Viet Minh have been specially active with propaganda, promising an independent Thai state. I met Deo Van Long, the President of the Thai Federation—for the tribes have been given some rights of local government. He was convinced that his people would remain loyal, and emphatic that they were not Communists, but admitted that pressure was intense. They were completely surrounded, and the air link with Lai Chau was their only connection with the outside world.

These isolated forts are thrilling. At Na Sam I saw an emergency operation on an injured man: as soon as he was sufficiently recovered, he was put on an aircraft for Hanoi, attended by a devoted Flight Nurse. I heard radio communications with patrols far out in Viet Minh territory. I admired the tremendous strength of this tropical Verdun, with some of the features of the Maginot Line. And I responded to the very high morale and spirits of its defenders.

Yet I was uneasy. The place is, of course, shockingly expen-

sive to maintain, and is garrisoned by 10,000 of the best troops in the Franco-Vietnam army. Its victory six months earlier was important, but what of its future?

I put the question direct to General Gilles, its tough and hard-fighting commander. "You had better ask that in Saigon," he grinned. "My job is to make the place impregnable, and to hit the enemy whenever and wherever I can. These things I do."

One of his staff argued that Na Sam cut an important line of Viet Minh communications. While this is true, it bears no relation to any similar situation in Europe. Large quantities of Viet Minh supplies are carried on the shoulders of thousands of coolies, who are not dependent on roads. There is little doubt that Na Sam has been effectively by-passed.

He also claimed that it was a good base for a counter-attack. I could scarcely agree. The main Viet Minh forces are grouped around the fringes of the delta, fifty miles and more away. To attack them in the rear would mean a precarious march through very difficult mountain country with a hundred possibilities of ambush. Paratroop attacks would be much more effective. Nor was it true that reinforcements can be rushed quickly by air from Na Sam to danger spots—at least, no more quickly than from Hanoi, whence the aircraft would have to come.

It seemed to me that some of the French staff still hoped for another enemy attack on Na Sam. This could happen, but I doubt its possibility. With their present equipment the Viet Minh leaders must have learned from bitter experience that they could not hope for success, and might incur very heavy losses. In war, a clever enemy seldom does as you wish: he prefers to do something which you do not expect.

The fact is that, should they choose, the Viet Minh leaders could contain Na Sam and immobilize tens of thousands of troops merely by a continuous threat—involving no more than a few hundred men.

Despite their logic, the French can be very sentimental. Na Sam has become a symbol. A withdrawal now would be a severe blow to French prestige. And the longer it is delayed, the more damaging it could be.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Na Sam was evacuated in July 1953. See *Epilogue*.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE WAR OF MINDS

#### I

“**F**OR Christ, but against the Church!”

This was the first Viet Minh slogan quoted to me as I began an enquiry into local methods of political and ideological warfare—subjects in which I have a great interest and a certain experience.

Investigation was not at all difficult. Any number of Viet Minh prisoners were available, and most of them were quite willing to talk, though some did not know what propaganda was, or realize that they had been within its administrations. Even more useful were intelligent Vietnamese who had spent years in Viet Minh prison camps. And, for a stroke of luck, in one group of prisoners I found two men who admitted that they had been used as propagandists. One of them, evidently recognizing me as a potential convert, plunged eagerly into his torrent of arguments and slogans.

It was generally agreed that Viet Minh excesses usually came with the first flush of an attack. Once a prisoner had been taken to the rear, he was reasonably well treated, by local standards—the aim was, not to subjugate him, but to convert him. This applied to both sides.

The Communist propaganda followed traditional methods in Oriental forms. First it insisted that Viet Minh was *not* Communist, but Nationalist. A sophisticated European would have found it difficult to reconcile this with the teaching that Stalin was the greatest man in the world, with Mao Tse Tung as a close second. (I could get no guidance as to the standing of Malenkov.) But this teaching was directed, not to sophisticated Europeans, but largely to simple peasants of limited outlook. The American experience with their Korean prisoners showed

what can be done with men who are completely cut off from all other sources of information.

The propagandists were given stock answers for all usual questions. Yes, it was true that in history China had been the hereditary enemy of Vietnam, but now there was a *new* China, burning with zeal to benefit all its neighbours. As a subsidiary argument, prisoners were reminded of the shocking behaviour of Chiang Kai-shek's troops during their occupation of northern Vietnam in 1945-6. Since many of the prisoners had suffered from this, they accepted the argument—and with it the fallacy that, since the Chinese Communists were the enemies of the Nationalists, they must by inference be very much better people, with completely different ideas.

Not until a very much later stage was there any mention of Marxism, and then only to selected likely converts. Generally the subject of Communism was deliberately ignored, or hidden in vague phrases about 'people's democracies'.

As usual, there was no attempt at consistency—the appeal was varied to suit the recipient. In one camp the slogan (usually the subject for a month's indoctrination talks) would be that 'religion is the opiate of the people'—no mention being made of Lenin, who emphasized the phrase with so much vigour. In the next section of the camp, where Catholic prisoners were gathered, emphasis would be on the slogan, 'For Christ, but against the Church'. The inconsistency of this varied approach was not noticed by the prisoners, who only heard their own section. The ingenuity of the propaganda will be noted. Even among Europeans there are those who accept the Christian ethic but are full of criticisms of the church. The wealth and power of church leaders were freely expounded. Prisoners were told true stories of religious persecution and oppression—with no mention of the fact that the events quoted took place hundreds of years ago. Coupled with all this was the unctuous plea that Christ Himself was on the side of the 'people's democracy', and against all forms of imperialism and colonialism. Variation also applied to members of the many religions prevalent in Vietnam. Each group gained the impression that its own form would be favoured in the new state.

The question of the French receives careful treatment. Their leaders are wicked reactionaries who are against all progress, but



the French themselves are 'people' who will one day range themselves under the banner of the new democracies. 'Death to the colonialists' and 'Down with the Bank of Indo-China' mingled with 'Long live the French people!'

One slogan was more consistent: 'He who is not for us is against us.' The Viet Minh were the only ones in step: all others were 'traitors'. This included the Emperor Bao Dai and, of course, the Vietnam government. These were alleged to be French puppets, who had sold their country for personal gain. The personal note can always be dramatized in propaganda, and long talks showed that it had been effective. It was a great advantage to the propagandists that to most peasants the Vietnam leaders were little more than names. Even Bao Dai was scarcely known outside his own personal kingdom of Annam.

Yet it was obvious that the most successful appeal had been made to the poorer peasants. 'Land for the peasant!' has always been a popular cry, echoing the inherent desire of most men for land of their own. It is an argument likely to be accepted without question or reason.

Indeed, elementary reasoning shows its fallacy quite clearly. A government can take land from its former owners and distribute it to new owners, but this does not create any more land. Whatever process of agricultural reform is applied, there are bound to be large numbers of landless peasants even after the re-shuffle of ownership.

In Tonkin there are not even any landlords—practically all the farms belong to the peasants working them. As they are nearly all quite tiny, any further division would be absurd. What then does the promise of 'land for the peasant' mean? Since no more land is available in the delta, it can only mean that landless peasants will be allocated land in the hinterland. But this has always been available. Any man who cared to clear a few acres of forest could claim them as his own. The difficulty has always lain in the innate conservatism of the Vietnamese peasant. To him land means rice swamps in the delta. It is only quite recently that moderate numbers have been persuaded to transfer themselves to the upland areas.

Yet I met dozens of unfortunate peasants who had never heard of Karl Marx, and who had only the haziest ideas as to

what the war was all about, but who had accepted uncritically the promise of land. In some way land would be provided for them in the delta. Maybe all anti-Viet Minh farmers would be killed or exiled, and their land given to the converts, one man suggested naïvely.

In Annam—of which Viet Minh control a large share—the situation is somewhat different: about 22 per cent of the land is owned by landlords. These have been expropriated—without compensation, of course, the landlords generally taking all precautions to keep out of Viet Minh reach—and divided among the working peasants, who were naturally highly delighted. Yet they were represented among the prisoners, and I noticed more than a trace of dissatisfied concern. When they were allocated their farms they were told: "Hitherto you have worked under an iniquitous system, giving half your crop to the landlord. That is all over. Henceforward the land belongs to you. In gratitude, therefore, you will now give half your crop to the State, which is quite a different thing."

Some of the peasants, simple though they might be, had begun to wonder if it *were* the same thing under another name—especially when the State's share rose to 60 per cent or even 80 per cent, or otherwise a proportionate tax, in the stress of war's demands.

(If a Viet Minh area is recaptured, the national government makes no attempt to 'unscramble the egg' and restore the land to its original owner. Instead, it arranges reasonable compensation for him, spread over a period of years.)

The land propaganda seemed to me to be the most effective of all that used by the Viet Minh. One point was significant: not one of the peasants to whom I talked had heard a collective farm so much as mentioned!

## II

European and African prisoners, should they survive the occasional initial excesses, are well treated by local standards. Again the idea is to win them over, and variations on the same themes are favoured. Moroccans, Algerians and Senegalese are persuaded that they, too, are exploited peoples, and thus the



brothers of the Viet Minh. Again, Communism as such is not stressed, since it would be unlikely to appeal to North African Moslems.

A much greater influence is, however, brought to bear on Europeans. Often the argument is not ideological, but financial. The Foreign Legion consists largely of soldiers of fortune: having done their duty to their employers, argue the Viet Minh, why not accept other employment, and serve as instructors to their captors? Conditions and pay are good—at least, very much better than ordinary prisoners enjoy. This appeal has had its successes. Germans are especially favoured as instructors.

When Vietnamese show signs of responding to treatment—and I have stressed that it is difficult for a man to resist uncontradicted pleadings over a period of years—they are carefully sorted out. The most promising are sent to special camps for indoctrination. Here at last Communism is not merely mentioned, but actually preached—in simplified form, for popular consumption. Again the method justifies its use. Some of the most fanatical Communists I met in the prison camps admitted that they had once fought on the side of Vietnam.

The fate of those considered as hopeless from every viewpoint, whether as recruits to the army or the creed, is pitiable. Conditions in their camps are appalling: the prisoners are very hard worked on a minimum basis of subsistence.

Yet, in the background, one of the most successful influences used by the Viet Minh is that of fear. In their own territory no opposition is, of course, possible. The régime is strict, and any suggestion of 'treachery' entails drastic consequences.

Even in the areas under French-Vietnamese control fear is a predominant factor. As I have shown, many people believe that the government cannot protect them against Viet Minh threats or terrorism, so in Oriental fashion they prefer not to take sides. It is a feeble outlook, and often brings disaster on those who practise it. And it suggests that the Viet Minh propaganda is more effective than that of the government.

### III

It can be appreciated that the attitude of a responsible govern-

ment could hardly be as unrestricted as that of a rebel force: even taking this into account, however, the official propaganda seemed in many ways to lack force. Its directives imposed severe limitations on the executive staff.

Every town, and most large villages, has its news room, where photographs and bulletins are displayed, and from which a loud-speaker periodically blares. The rooms are well frequented: I had heard that people were afraid to use them lest they should be reported as traitors to the Viet Minh, but by my observation this was not true. I did notice, however, that the bulk of the frequenters were young men. While in the long run this may be a good thing, it is a pity that the peasant cannot be tempted away from his severely local outlook.

"There is fear as well," said a Vietnamese information officer. "In the towns the people are eager to hear our news, but in many villages they are afraid—that the Viet Minh will come back!"

Not even fear, however, can keep the villagers away from free cinema shows: naturally, the pictures are chosen with a purpose, and a speaker usually delivers a short harangue during the programme. In the rural areas this has proved the most effective form of propaganda. "Our people are so unsophisticated that they still believe in the cinema!"

Neither still nor motion pictures ever show Viet Minh personalities, and they seldom mention Viet Minh at all. It is true that the first Vietnamese objective must be to get its own leaders well known *nationally*—many of them, competent men, have only local reputations. Thus the Emperor Bao Dai and Prime Minister Nguyen van Tam are constantly featured. But it is absurd to ignore Viet Minh.

We tried this policy during the last war, and it was a dismal failure. For example, it was officially decided in high quarters to ignore William Joyce, who early in the war was a danger to morale. But the ordinary people saw no sense in the official decision, and listening to Lord Haw Haw became a popular pastime. My own inclination was not to ignore, but to attack: I would have put up someone like A. P. Herbert to reply to Joyce nightly, and I am confident that he would have won the battle of brains with witty ease.

The Vietnamese government faces the same kind of problem,



and again the initiative lies in the hands of its opponents. It is useless to condemn Communism to peasants who have never heard of it—or, if they have, visualize it as a 'land for the peasant' proposition. It is useless to ignore the fact that the Viet Minh control half the country, and are well represented in the rest. These things are *known* to all.

I agreed that propaganda on Viet Minh atrocities would be a mistake—it would provoke fear rather than animosity. Atrocity propaganda is nearly always a mistake. It lends itself to exaggeration, and this is easily discounted.

However, more moderate forms are available and could be used. "The Viet Minh destroyed this pumping station. We repaired it"—this sort of thing would have a tangible effect on peasants whose livelihood depended on the station.

"But they *know* that already," said a director of propaganda, thereby revealing his ignorance of his own subject. Public memory is very short—essential facts need constant reiteration. I warned him that one day he would wake up to discover that the peasants believed that the station had been destroyed by the Vietnamese and repaired by Viet Minh!

The French propaganda is quite correctly very restrained. It must be an essential part of their plan to remain in the background: otherwise they would appear to support the Viet Minh Nationalist slogans. Their news rooms—also frequented—encouraged confidence in winning the war and by innumerable pictures of war material at least suggested that they were very unlikely to lose it.

This was important. I have mentioned, and shall contend later, that one of the weaknesses in Vietnam is the number who are waiting to see which side is likely to win. *Attentisme* is the enemy. It could be countered by a more resolute and less stereotyped propaganda. If the Vietnam government could make the whole of its people confident of victory, the character of the war would change overnight.

Although it has little to do—on the surface, at least—with Marxism, the Viet Minh *have* an ideology, and proclaim it boldly. The government should be equally bold. It should proclaim its plans for the short term and long term development of its country. This would arouse not only interest, but confidence. If the government were planning to do this or that in

ten years' time, they must be quite sure that they were going to win the war. The government should emphasize its policy again and again and again. And then again.

So far it has limited itself to stereotyped forms, often too sophisticated for the people affected. It does not seem to have studied the minor techniques of propaganda—the power of rumour, for example. I gave a short address on this subject to a group of officials, and they seemed amazed at my disclosures. I left a final suggestion—that it might pay handsome dividends if they were to sink their pride and engage a first-rate professional adviser in propaganda.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### WAR COMES TO LAOS

#### I

**N**or even Communists are always right.

They have consistently presented the Viet Minh war as a struggle for national liberation, a fight against colonial imperialism, and for the right of the people to freedom and to rule themselves. This has been good propaganda—so much so that in many liberal circles abroad the Viet Minh are regarded as patriotic Nationalists rather than as Communists. But in April 1953 the Viet Minh leaders—or their superior directors—made a mistake.

Hitherto they had found it possible to maintain the fiction of a revolutionary struggle for liberty. True, there were some Viet Minh elements in Cambodia, among its considerable Vietnamese minority, but the battle was essentially for Vietnam: 99 per cent of all the forces engaged were concentrated there. All propaganda and slogans referred not to Indo-China but to Vietnam. Then the pretence of patriotism was abruptly shattered by the invasion of Laos.

The Laotians are a peaceful and gentle people. They are strict Buddhists, of the Little Vehicle: as such they are forbidden to kill anything, even a fly. Hence they are not a martial race: they do not interfere with others, and never did anyone any harm—there are less than a million of them all told, so they have never been a 'menace' to their neighbours. They share with so many other little peoples the pathetic and unavailing desire to be left alone.

They are quite satisfied with their way of life. Their king is one of themselves, living as simply as they do: his counsellors are chosen from among them. They know no extremes of wealth and poverty, for they have no ambition: any man who wanted more land has only to take it—not from his neigh-

bour, but from the forest. Every man in his youth has spent a period in a monastery, learning to apply the precepts of Buddhism. A less aggressive people it would be impossible to find the world over.

However, they had of course to be 'liberated' from the imperialists and their own reactionary rulers. A renegade and ambitious prince, rejected by his own people but courted by the Communists, was selected to form a 'Peoples' Democratic Government'. With some difficulty he found enough followers to fill most of the posts.

The attack on Laos had long been anticipated, for secrets are hard to keep in this part of the world. The French policy was effective but not spectacular—to withdraw into the interior, and make the Viet Minh fight at the end of very long lines of communication. Such a plan, however sound strategically, can have depressing effects on morale, and there was a wave of depression when it was announced that the French had evacuated their fortified post of Sam Neua.

(Viet Minh exultantly announced that a Laotian unit had gone over to them. This was not true: the unit consisted of local men, and when ordered to retreat south it simply disintegrated—the men did not wish to leave their homes! The incident is typical of the casual outlook and unmilitary attitude of the Laotians.)

The French were, however, surprised at the extraordinary speed of the Viet Minh advance. Its lightly armed forces swarmed from the east and north, followed by long trains of coolies carrying supplies. The French struck at these with their air forces, but were quite unable to stem the advance.

Leaving patrols to maintain contact with the Communists, they retreated to the Plain of Jars, where a stretch of open country provided better opportunities for fighting than the close jungle. But this left almost open the way to Luang Prabang, the royal capital. Only a few isolated posts contested the advance, and these could be by-passed and reduced at leisure. And Luang Prabang was defended only by a single company of Laotian infantry, no man of which had ever fired a shot in anger, or ever wished so to do.



## II

I flew into Luang Prabang with a battalion of parachutists. The Viet Minh troops might cover the ground rapidly, but aircraft are faster. As the threat developed, the single Laotian company was reinforced by six battalions of French, Foreign Légion, and African forces—all tough, fighting troops.

I had merely begged a lift to get to the centre of the scene, but as lorries and jeeps were waiting at the airstrip I boarded one of them and went on with the parachutists. We bumped over a crazy bamboo bridge supported by primitive boats—permanent bridges are not always practicable over a river which rises by thirty or forty feet in the rainy season—and sped to the north.

I admired the sheer competency of my companions. As they jumped from their transport, some immediately began to construct strong points along the hills flanking the road. Others went off in small groups, on patrols, to feel the enemy strength.

All about me the troops worked furiously, using the jungle material with great ingenuity. Two hours later a patrol returned, with two prisoners. I was present at their interrogation: they were frightened, but knew little. They, too, had been on patrol, probing the French defences.

"What did you think of them?" asked a French captain, as they were taken to the rear.

"I thought they were very tired—exhausted. If the Viet Minh forces are all like that, you have time—there will be no attack to-day or to-morrow."

I went back into Luang Prabang myself—an overgrown village, with a few French buildings, casual streets of Laotian houses on stilts, the king's palace on a hillside, and a golden pagoda on a hill top. For a capital anticipating attack it was amazingly tranquil. The French commander, no hard-boiled type, but a man of fatherly aspect, was quietly confident: so was the civilian High Commissioner. We pored over the map, studying the Intelligence reports. Colonel Dallier was much interested in my impression of the prisoners' exhaustion.

I thought his confidence had infected the local people, but

at lunch at the Bungalow I met Henri Deydier, an archæologist of the *École Française d'Extrême Orient*.

"It's not quite that," he said. "You are quite right—the town is absolutely tranquil. But that is not due to us. There is a famous blind bonze here—and he has prophesied that the Viet Minh will go away. So now nobody is worrying any more."

We walked up to the monastery, passing by bamboo houses in tree-lined streets which give a village appearance to the town—its sleepy greenery occasionally startled by the vivid scarlet of the flame tree. The bonze was old: he squatted on the wooden floor of the monastery, his chin almost sinking into his simple robe of saffron cotton.

Yes, he muttered, as we questioned him, the Viet Minh would not come to Luang Prabang. They were not good men, and the town would not agree with them—its spirits would annoy and terrify them. So they would go away.

We pressed for more—there was little comfort either in news or in opinion these days in Indo-China. For a long while he was silent: then he repeated that the Viet Minh would go away, and by November there would be none of them left. But did this mean that they would have retired from Laos? Or that their forces would be completely disrupted? He declined to be more explicit.

Even his first suggestion appeared hopelessly optimistic. Intelligence reports showed that powerful Viet Minh forces were concentrating on Luang Prabang from three directions: an attack appeared inevitable—this was certainly the French military opinion, and quite properly all preparations were being made.

The streets of Luang Prabang are in the valleys, but all about are green mountains—lovely country, never intended to suffer the scars of war. Palms and bamboos cover the lower hillsides, merging into more substantial vegetation: the lighter green of banana trees enlivens the valleys, while ricefields of very irregular shape have been terraced near the river banks. The mountains are entirely covered with forest or jungle: this was not country for large-scale battles, but for skirmishes of patrols—or for infiltration!

We wandered casually among the ordinary people, going unconcerned about their everyday business, or sleeping contentedly



in any shade that offered. There was nothing to worry about: the blind bonze had promised immunity.

I mused on the strange nature of confidence: and its dangers. Because of a prophecy, the shaken morale of these people had been restored: yet now, instead of preparing to meet the threat, they were ignoring it.

In simple communities precious confidence is generated in simple ways. (And many communities which pride themselves on their sophistication are really simple.) Some days later I was in Vientiane, the political capital of Laos. There I found a cabinet minister whose confidence was shaken—he did not see how his country could be saved. I strove to comfort him, for his hesitancy could affect others.

Military arguments failed. Then I said: "Look, my birthday comes in two days, and that has always been a lucky day."

"How?"

"Take one example. In the winter of 1944 I was making a lot of official speeches. People demanded to know when the war would end. It was not difficult to guess that the spring of 1945 should see the finish, but some demanded even a date. So I gave them my birthday—May 8th."

"Ah! And the war *did* end on May 8th!" His eyes were shining: for the moment I shared the status of the blind bonze.

"Will you stay here until your birthday?" he pleaded.

"Very well. I will."

He began to give orders with a new decision and courage.

### III

The blind bonze was justified: the Viet Minh did not take Luang Prabang.

They did not even attack it: I waited in vain for the threatened assault. True, military considerations probably affected the enemy outlook rather than the activities of the town's 'spirits': the Viet Minh had expected to have to face only one Laotian company, and now they faced six very combatant battalions with artillery support. So they adopted their familiar tactics, besieged a few outlying posts, but by-passed the town.



Field work

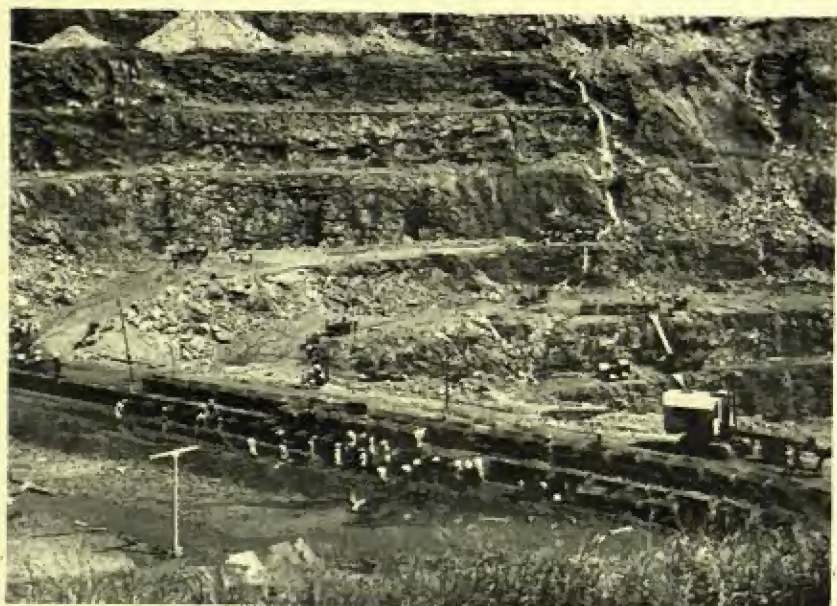


The fisherman means business



The Village Council of Notables





Biggest coal-hole in the world—the Cam Pha Mine, Hon Gay



Bay of Along

Where next? I went to the Plain of Jars, so called from great circular stones which belittered it—almost certainly funeral monuments of some older race.

A day or two earlier a Viet Minh battalion had stumbled on the French camp: there had been a sharp engagement, then the enemy had retired.

"Probably he's gone past us," said a French officer. "That's the usual technique."

"And you?"

"We shall stay here."

"And for supplies?"

"Air. There we can move at will, any distance behind the Viet Minh lines. To you, accustomed to European wars, all this may seem strange. You may not realize that at the moment you are standing about two hundred miles within the enemy lines!"

The French command of the air does of course dominate the situation. Yet I was slightly concerned. Most of the local air strips are just that—strips of beaten earth. The previous day, after a mere two-hour rainfall—in which several inches of rain fell!—that at Luang Prabang had become impossible, and I had failed to take off. I could imagine difficulties ahead once the wet season really began: not even parachutes and helicopters can cope with everything.

I flew on to Vientiane, the political capital of Laos: and its religious capital, for it teems with pagodas. I never saw so many bonzes. There was a colourful scene early in the morning, when they made their rounds with their begging bowls: with downcast eyes they stood before a house while a boy acolyte presented the bowl: the housewife would put in a handful of rice, or whatever else she had to spare. By the end of the round the bowl contained the most surprising assortment. But the bonzes must not think of earthly things like food: they eat merely to survive. Moreover their last meal of the day is at noon, so that they have ample time for fasting contemplation.

Vientiane consists in the main of one long street, well lined with pagodas. The shops are mostly Chinese, and very utilitarian. This is a thoroughly Oriental capital, despite occasional European touches. One of these was helpful to me: the High Commissioner had a 'Maison de Passage' for guests



in his garden, and I found myself in a suite with many windows—useful in the great heat.

The Laotian people are quite different from the Vietnamese. They are darker skinned and more sturdily built, but are not nearly so energetic or enterprising. Here costumes differ. Some of the men favour brightly coloured breeches and shirt, but the more popular garment is the sarong, usually home-woven. The women also use the sarong, mostly in vivid colours and highly embroidered: above the waist they wear an indeterminate garment rather like a cotton opera vest.

I wandered out into the villages, among palm groves. The houses are built of palm or bamboo trunks or leaves, and stand on piles six or seven feet above the ground. The people are gentle and retiring—in the afternoons the entire village seems to be asleep. But when I had been in a village for a few hours the reserve would gradually vanish, and a warm hospitality take its place.

The appointments of each house are simplicity itself: so little is needed in such a climate. Clothes are almost a burden—most of the children ran about naked. "We have enough," said a headman. "And there is always more."

This is the absurdity of the 'liberation' propaganda of the Viet Minh. Here are no peasants exploited by rapacious landlords: each man owns his ground. And, if he wants more, he has only to wrest another acre or two from the forest, and include them within his primitive irrigation system, and his problem is solved.

Only some serious need, like an increased family, will prompt a Laotian to take such a step. The neighbouring peoples call him lazy, but he thinks it is a pleasant way of life. Nature is so provident that he scarcely needs to be. So he calculates the minimum area necessary to provide food for his family with just a little extra as a cash crop for essential purchases—tools, or jewellery for his wife. Very seldom will he till a greater acreage than will suffice for the simple needs of his dependants. If his family decreases, he usually makes a proportionate decrease in the area cultivated! He is devoid of ambition: wealth means nothing to him: he is content with so little, though much more is available for the asking.

For relaxation there will be an occasional feast—each pagoda

in turn holds its own fête. But his favourite pleasure is to lie in the shade watching his rice or coconuts grow. A less promising recruit to Communism can scarcely be imagined: appeals for higher production would be treated as comic.

The towns have their schools and hospitals: some of the villages have primary schools and medical posts. All have pagodas. And, though Laos in theory adheres to the Little Vehicle, which many bonzes interpret strictly, it seemed to me that the villages tended to admit exotic practices. Their pagodas were Buddhist, but many altars often bore charms and gifts to spirits, good and evil.

#### IV

As I modestly celebrated my birthday in the one French café in Vientiane, I was glad to meet James Fawcett, Reuter's correspondent in Indo-China. A few days earlier I had found myself involved in an awkward argument in Hanoi.

Now the B.B.C. news is highly esteemed in many countries: in most its authenticity is never questioned. Hence, if it makes a slip—and its editors are only human—the results may be serious.

When the awaited attack on Luang Prabang failed to develop, we wondered where the Viet Minh would strike next. Then the B.B.C. Far Eastern news announced that three columns were pressing towards Vientiane.

This was startling: no one in Laos even thought of doubting the B.B.C. information, and hasty preparations for evacuation began. But the French reacted promptly, and went so far as to issue a formal denunciation of the statement's accuracy.

In the Press Camp at Hanoi officials looked at me suspiciously: as the only Englishman there, I must obviously be the one who had reported the false news. But this was quite untrue. I had made no communication to the B.B.C.: or, on this subject, to anyone else.

Suspicion was next switched to Fawcett, known to be somewhere in Laos. So now I warned him of his prospective reception when he got back to Hanoi.

A forthright Australian, he was annoyed. The French had



copies of every despatch he had sent, and must know that he had not been guilty of such imaginative reporting.

"The trouble is that the B.B.C. have nobody out this way," he pointed out. "They get most of their information about Indo-China from agencies in Paris."

I did not need to be reminded of the danger of this. News from Paris is apt to be tinged with politics. The French Communists, of course, openly favour the Viet Minh: so do some of the Socialists. Between them they can colour many items of 'news' with their own opinions: so, of course, can their political opponents.

I went on to see Nhoury Abhay, the Foreign Minister. "But we did the Viet Minh no harm!" he cried, pathetically. "We never did anyone any harm!"

How many politicians have imagined that such a policy will bring peace to their countries? It should ensure it, but the modern world is too deeply troubled to consider mere inoffensiveness as a virtue. The Prime Minister spoke more forcefully of his country's determination to resist such blatant aggression, and urged an appeal to the United Nations. The Crown Prince, while not ruling this out, favoured a general mobilization—at least as far as the supply of arms would allow.

We were talking at the airfield. I had fulfilled my promise and stayed until my birthday, but there were no signs of a Viet Minh offensive against the capital: indeed, some of the advanced units were now reported as retiring. With us were General Salan, the French commander-in-chief, and M. Letourneau, the minister for the Associated States, who was on an official visit. As I was now anxious to head southwards, I asked for a place on their aircraft.

"With pleasure," said M. Letourneau. "But we are going to Luang Prabang."

"To-day?"

"Yes."

"But the weather—there was a lot of rain in the night. The airstrip——"

He—and his pilot—evidently thought that the weather reports were good enough, and set off. Within an hour they were back again—the airstrip at Luang Prabang was unfit for landing.

My own birthday luck held. After hanging about for some

time, I learned that two aircraft were to leave Vientiane—a military Dakota: then, very soon afterwards, a civilian machine.

"It's my birthday—I'm getting old," I said. "I'm tired of sitting on boxes or the floor. I'll be soft, and go on the civilian plane."

The army Dakota skidded and crashed on take-off! Happily no one was killed, but the passengers, sitting on boxes, with no straps, were flung haphazard in all directions. For an hour afterwards we were kept busy with wounds and broken limbs. Then the civilian machine gave me a smooth flight southwards. Nearing Saigon we ran into a sudden and very violent thunderstorm, but I had noticed Air France wings on my pilot's jacket, and sat back in confidence as he brought us to land in rain which reduced visibility to a few yards.

V

"The Viet Minh don't want Laos," the Foreign Minister declared. "They want the road through it."

His argument appeared to be sound. All over the world people were discussing *why* the Communists had attacked Laos and so blatantly revealed their hand.

The few prisoners captured in the campaign knew little, but a variety of sources prompted an answer. The war in the delta had not gone too well for the Viet Minh. They had had plenty of local successes, but there was no suggestion that they might ever be able to drive out the French and the Vietnamese. An army needs an occasional victory to maintain its morale—and Laos offered a certain and easy victory.

Naturally, a spectacular Viet Minh success would conversely lower morale in Vietnam: it could encourage a 'peace at any price' movement in France: and it might persuade the French command to send into Laos forces which could be more usefully employed elsewhere.

Or the move may have been dictated from China. At this time the protracted negotiations over an armistice in Korea were in progress, and one event had startled the Chinese—the Americans had agreed with the French that in any settlement the Far East would be considered as a whole, and that Indo-



China and Korea were all part of the same campaign. Thus the Chinese might be tempted to seize as much territory as possible for bargaining purposes: then they would agree to give up Laos provided they were allowed to keep Tonkin.

But why were the Viet Minh now retiring? The answer may be simply that the policy had been revealed, and thus lost all chance of success.

It could be a victory for the French policy of forcing the Viet Minh to fight only at the end of long lines of communication. A man can carry a week's ration of rice, but tens of thousands of coolies are needed to maintain the ammunition supplies of even a small army. And maybe the Viet Minh timing was wrong: the rainy season was near, when rivers can rise abruptly and hold up columns for weeks.

Or could it be that world opinion, after all, had some effect? Apart from the Communist states, the Viet Minh aggression on an inoffensive neighbour had been universally condemned. Had their Chinese masters, anxious about negotiations in Korea, now calculated the adverse effects of the invasion, and ordered its reversal?

Not that the French were complacent. Even in their retirement the Viet Minh would doubtless invest some outposts and might indeed capture them. And there were still reports of enemy forces *south* of the Plain of Jars. Within a few days these took more definite shape—small Viet Minh elements had reached the frontier near Pak San, and had crossed the Mekong into Siam!

This was significant, and in keeping with the plan already apparent. For when the Communist 'liberators' invaded Laos, they proclaimed not a free Laos, but a free Thai state.

Months earlier (January 1953) the Chinese Communist government had set up an 'independent' Thai state at Cheli, in the southern tip of its territory—where China meets Tonkin and Burma. The region is mountainous and difficult, and has a population of less than 200,000. But it is intended to serve as a nucleus for a Communist state covering an important part of South-East Asia. Altogether there are something like four million Thais in southern China.

We have seen that many of the Laotians are of Thai stock: so are some of the neighbouring Shan tribes of Burma: so, too,

of course, are the Siamese. The leaders of the latter made a grave error a few years ago, when they changed the name of their country to Thailand. In implication this construed a claim to neighbouring territories inhabited by Thais—part of which was temporarily satisfied during the Japanese occupation. Now they may find that such claims can work both ways: the new Communist Thai state established in Cheli and now being extended to Laos is obviously intended to include Siam.

There are already many facts which can be used in propaganda to justify such a move. The bulk of the population of the Korat plateau of Siam is of Laotian origin—its ancestors were moved there by Siamese conquerors in the nineteenth century. Thus, if the Laotians were 'liberated', they would doubtless burn with ardour to relieve their oppressed cousins over the Mekong.

Further, during the Japanese invasion, about 60,000 Vietnamese took refuge in Siam. Many of them fell under the sway of Viet Minh, whose far-sighted leaders instructed them not to come home after the war, but to stay where they were. It was this contingent that the Viet Minh forces crossing the frontier at Pak San hastened to join. Reports speak of open preparations for activity, with pictures of Ho Chi Minh freely displayed.

It is very doubtful if the attack on Siam will be military. Despite recent social advances, Siam is still unstable politically. Most of its recent governments have achieved power by *coup d'état* or palace revolution, and their power is limited outside the capital, Bangkok.

One of the Siamese leaders is in exile. Pridi Panomyong was a resistance chief during the war, and became prime minister in 1944. He had some popular support, but unfortunately the king was murdered while he was in office, and he had to resign. Since then the other factions have been careful to keep him away from the centre of things. Recent reports suggest that he has been to China, and has established contact with the Viet Minh. When I saw him in 1947 he was no Communist, but he would not be the first politician to accept help from tainted sources, and to regret his action later.

Of the sixteen million population of Siam, no less than three million are Chinese. While many of them are successful traders, it may be assumed that so large a number must contain



a proportion of Communists, and an even larger proportion of those who want to be on the winning side. Here is an admirable recruiting ground for fifth columnists.

Thus with Chinese on the spot, Viet Minh infiltrators, and the potential appeal of Laotian Thais to their brothers in Siam, Mao Tse Tung is not short of disruptive weapons. Even the suggestion of their use has been enough to change the character of the Indo-China war. This is no longer a Vietnamese ideological civil conflict. It is the beginning of an attempt to bring the whole of South-East Asia within the Communist fold: if it succeeded, it would be an economic and strategic disaster to the Western democracies. It would seem that the Chinese have revealed their hand too soon: but they are probably depending on that political blindness which persuades men to hide the truth from themselves until it is nearly too late.

## VI

My interview with King Sisavang Vong of Laos was the shortest on record.

When I arrived at his palace in Luang Prabang I learned that he was sick—he has a disease of the liver which causes him a good deal of pain. Naturally, I did not propose to trouble him, but an American journalist in a hurry had joined me.

An official of the court showed us in—the king was obviously a very sick man. My American friend talked of the danger—three Viet Minh divisions threatening Luang Prabang—and asked what the king was going to do.

"I stay here," he said.

"But——"

"I do not budge!"

I pulled my friend out of the room. Had he talked for an hour the king could not have said more. But, to my surprise, no one seemed to perceive the propaganda value of the invalid king's stand.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# JOURNEY INTO CAMBODIA

### I

My borrowed car sped over the delta from Saigon, passing the now familiar line of fortified posts, their dried mud battlements bristling with bamboo spikes as a *cheval de frise*. At the edge of the delta, the rich, red alluvial soil finishes abruptly. Rice growing remains the principal occupation, but the earth is an ordinary brown—when baked by the sun, a light fawn—dependent entirely on the rains for its irrigation.

Gradually the monotony of the ricefields was relieved by little woods, and by various subsidiary crops. The villages were no longer huddled within a protective group of trees, but stretched in long, straight open lines of simple houses.

I had not looked at the map carefully enough, and imagined that the frontier was the Mekong river. But after crossing the Vaico at Daulia I found a notice informing me that I was now entering the kingdom of Cambodia.

There was, of course, no sudden change, but the small forts and watch towers became less frequent—one every mile or so instead of every 500 yards. The population here was mixed, but easily distinguishable—the Cambodians are much darker than their neighbours.

The everyday working costume consists of any oddments which might be handy. In general, both men and women favour the local *sampot*, or sarong, a loose skirt wrapped around the waist—silk for best, cotton or rags for work. The men wear little if anything above the waist: the small boys are usually naked, but religion imposes clothing on girls. For the women, the Vietnamese trousers are replaced by the *sampot*—sometimes suspended from the breasts instead of the waist. In villages away from the road I noticed that women prefer to



be nude from the waist upwards, and on the whole this is more becoming.

The houses are here built on piles—though not so high as those farther north—and are of the simplest pattern. Fields of rice and vegetables are interspersed with open common land, whereon brown cattle graze. Then a green ribbon betrayed the Mekong: we ferried across it—a river a quarter of a mile wide, its waters tossed into little waves.

Now we progressed along the green ribbon, the actual river valley. Gradually the scene became more picturesque, as the road was bordered with sweet palms, banana trees and tamarinds. Beyond stretches a flat land of baked earth which in a few weeks' time would be inundated, for the level of the Mekong rises by as much as thirty feet. So rich is the country, in fact, that the road passes through an almost continuous village, the bamboo houses admirably fitting their green background. Then a pagoda on a mound told us that we were reaching Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.

It is a pleasant town, its residential areas set out in leafy boulevards. The best villas belong not to the French but to the Chinese, who have something like a monopoly of the city's more important trade. They number 100,000, a quarter of the population—and there are over 100,000 Vietnamese as well. Very gradually the Cambodian is being pushed out of his own capital. He is easy going, and not too fond of hard work, and in these days of mechanical progress more enterprising people reap the richer rewards.

"We prefer to work for ourselves," a Cambodian explained. "And as farmers," he added.

The Vietnam interest in education seems to be lacking here—the whole country has only three native doctors and three lawyers: it is hence more dependent on the French than is Vietnam. The Cambodians are not interested in professions requiring a long apprenticeship. Nor do they make particularly good soldiers: they are too casual, and lose interest easily. Admittedly the eternal garrisoning of watch towers is a severe test, but once a man loses interest in even such a monotonous task, then he is useless—indeed, a danger to his comrades.

Cambodia is a real Buddhist country. The streets were enlivened with the saffron robes of the bonzes, who seemed

to be numerous. The centre of Phnom Penh is a pagoda, the slopes of its mound decorated with smaller erections.

I walked round to the Royal Palace, so far the most Eastern thing I had seen in Indo-China. The interior of the throne room was not quite as ornate as I had expected, but the Silver Pagoda is unusual. It is floored by tiles of solid silver—I noticed that its caretaker followed me closely, to ensure that I was not seeking souvenirs: the golden Buddhas must be very valuable. Across a hot courtyard a school of bonzes was having a lesson in the Pali alphabet, so that they could interpret the earlier Buddhist writings. But for the moment I was more interested in the continuous frieze along the walls of the pagoda. One panel is very expressive: it represents hell, and some of the tortures are almost too realistic. One group of about twenty men about to be boiled in a huge pot look most unhappy.

A venerable bonze joined me, and grew enthusiastic over the scene. I told him the story of the Scottish pastor who addressed his flock: "And when ye, wicked sinners, suffer all the tortures of hell, ye will call out to the Lord, 'Lord, we didna ken'. And the Lord in his infinite mercy will reply, 'Weel, ye ken the noo'."

The bonze went off, delighted, to regale the other venerables. A whole group descended upon me, but I could think of no more stories about hell—at least, not suitable for Buddhist bonzes.

I learned that the palace was comparatively modern—until the French came, the king lived in a bamboo house like his subjects. Although its exterior is so Eastern, its interior is very Western, with armchairs and grand pianos. It was only at this time that Phnom Penh became the capital of Cambodia: until then it had been an ordinary provincial town.

Yet no place in the East can ever be ordinary: surprises await at every turn. In the streets of Phnom Penh I met a man carrying two tiger cubs. As I stopped to admire them, he suggested that I might like to buy them, but I foresaw too many difficulties. However, he had heard that there was a man at the hotel who was buying animals: I could confirm this, for at the next table I had heard someone refer to a consignment of baby elephants. Evidently business was done, for when next



I returned to the hotel the two baby tigers—and a honey bear—were playing on the lawn; but in chains.

## II

Cambodia is a land of ancient civilization. It reached the height of its power in the twelfth century, when its rule covered the present Siam, Cochin China, Annam, Laos and even a part of Malaya. By the sixteenth century its king was still a considerable figure in the Far East. Two hundred years later, however, the country was invaded in turn by Annamites and Siamese, and in 1806 independence was virtually lost. The Cambodian king was crowned in Siam—but at the same time paid a tribute to the Emperor of Annam.

Once a Danegelt period begins, it has no end. By the middle of the nineteenth century Cambodia was in great distress—Siamese armies occupied its northern provinces, Annamese its south. In despair the king appealed to the French, who had already shown their interest in the region. In 1863 a treaty was agreed whereby Cambodia became a French protectorate.

Free from the fear of his neighbours, the king and his entourage reverted to old ideas: they persistently refused the reforms which the French suggested, and which were long overdue. Their feudal intransigence provoked local revolts, and in 1884 the French insisted on a new treaty. French 'Residents' were appointed as advisers to the Provincial Governors, and in the usual colonial style rapidly became the effective rulers.

Thereafter progress was continuous. One of the first French actions was to abolish the infliction of slavery for non-payment of debts! The administrative and judicial systems were completely reformed, the chaotic financial conditions firmly dealt with, and the foundations of democratic representation laid. Roads and railways were built, schemes of irrigation carried out and educational and medical services were introduced. Above all, public order was restored. True, there was one revolt in 1885—organized by those who had been hit by the French suppression of slavery for debts! Otherwise progress was steady and effective.

During the second World War Cambodia shared the fate of Vietnam—with the additional injury that the Japanese ceded the province of Battambang to Thailand (Siam). When the Japs struck against the French in March 1945 they allowed Cambodia to proclaim its independence, and appointed Son Ngoc Thanh as its puppet prime minister. But on the defeat of Japan he was deposed and arrested, and a legally appointed government was installed.

Then followed the series of negotiations with France, leading to the formal declaration of Cambodian independence within the French Union. This was confirmed by treaty in 1949. The powers of the French High Commissioner were defined, and full internal sovereignty was given to the Cambodian king and people.

A Constitution had already been approved, and the country proceeded to elect a National Assembly. (In addition, there was a kind of Senate, the Council of the Kingdom, elected by limited suffrage: it was only consultative.) The Democratic Party obtained 55 seats out of 75, and soon showed that its name was a gross distortion. Corruption was rife: many members thought only of their own power and wealth. The official Cambodian narrative<sup>1</sup> comments euphemistically and vaguely: 'This ascendancy of one party, coupled to the fact that the duties imposed by the new form of Government on the representatives of the Nation had been often imperfectly understood by them, was the source of difficulties met by the executive power in the accomplishment of its work, rendered particularly difficult by the circumstances and by a certain unrest throughout the country, caused by some elements, the majority of which were under foreign influences.'

This 'unrest' amounted virtually to political and social chaos. The Cambodian population included some hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese, a few of whom adopted the Viet Minh ideology and methods. To give an air of conviction to their propaganda, they enlisted a small number of Cambodians, so that the revolt could be claimed as a struggle for 'the liberty of the people'. With the government rendered impotent by its internal contradictions and personal feuds, whole provinces were terrorized by a few thousand Viet Minh: divided counsels

<sup>1</sup> *Modern Cambodia*, published by the Press Office of the Royal Palace, 1950.



are the poorest defence against even a handful of determined men.

Nor was this all. During the Japanese occupation small resistance groups had been formed. They took the name of Khmer Issaraks—Khmer is the old word for Cambodian, and Issarak means liberty. Later the formations were revived under new conditions. They were largely local, dependent on loyalty to a leader. Some attempted to oppose the Viet Minh: some collaborated with them. Several groups proclaimed that the independence granted by the French was too circumscribed, and demanded complete freedom: some were just plain bandits. Most were a combination of all four, emphasizing whichever facet fitted the situation of the day. The sufferers were the unfortunate peasants, caught in a vicious triangle between Viet Minh, Issaraks, and government forces. Transfers of allegiance were common—for both rebel groups had representatives in the Assembly. No man knew where his neighbour stood at any given moment—or even where he stood himself.

The country was in a state of near-anarchy. In many regions there was no authority or order: taxes went unpaid—or were levied by the insurgent factions: lands were ravaged by rival forces: national leaders were assassinated.

From time to time the king changed his ministers or dissolved his parliament: but democracy is not established merely by the use of its name. The genuine patriots began to see that a steady progress was preferable to the present disorder of rival ambitions. A group of them turned again to the French, and very gradually some sort of order was restored: in some regions the French made a tacit truce with Issarak groups, so that both could concentrate against the more dangerous Viet Minh. The government forces did precisely nothing.

New elections in September 1951 eased the situation. The 'Democrats' got 54 seats, the 'Liberals' 18, and 6 went to two smaller parties. But some of the leading dissidents, whose anti-French or pro-Viet Minh policy had plunged the country into what was almost a civil war, were defeated.

The new government attempted to win over the Issaraks—who, interpreting this as a sign of weakness, redoubled their activities so as to increase their price. Under the banner of Nationalism they practised sheer banditry, but some of their

demagogic sentiments found hearers, and the French position became more and more difficult. Then the French government contributed to its own discomfiture. Son Ngoc Thanh, the puppet prime minister under the Japanese, had been sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in France—for collaboration. Now, in October 1951, he was released, and returned to Cambodia. He immediately launched a violent ultra-Nationalist campaign. The Democratic Party was split: it had a near-Communist left wing, a right wing which was prepared to follow the returned exile, and a centre which swayed from side to side according to the chances of victory. Then, the following March, Son Ngoc Thanh took to the bush and formed his own Issarak band. His propaganda was not merely anti-French—it became anti-royalist as well.

But the king is a personality. Despairing of a government whose only idea of maintaining order was the dictatorial method of arresting political opponents, he himself assumed leadership—with parliament still functioning. He entered into the campaign of 'pacification', not only with deeds, but with words. He persuaded Issarak leaders to make terms. The first of them was a veteran named Dap Chluon, who operated in the Western provinces: he made his formal submission, and was immediately named commandant of his old forces, now accepted as regular troops. Incidentally, he proved completely loyal, and harried the Viet Minh and Issaraks far more successfully than any government forces had ever done. Then, during my visit, a redoubtable Issarak chief named Puth Chlay—as tough a man as I ever saw—handed over his rifle to the king, and received it back from his hands. His 800 men were formed into a regiment, with Puth Chlay, of course, as its commander.

Very, very slowly the situation improved. There were small areas under Viet Minh control, and others where Issaraks lived on the country. But confidence is a tender growth, and revived even more slowly.

### III

King Norodom Sihanouk is popular among his people. It is customary to write like this of royalty, but in this case it is true. "What is more, he is the only honest man in the



country," said a senior officer. One hopes that this is slightly exaggerated, but the king has already given evidence of his strength of character and progressive ideas.

He is young—in the early thirties—and unmarried: there is a shortage of eligible princesses in the royal family. However, he has ten children by a number of 'favourites', and is devoted to them. He was heartbroken when one of his little daughters died.

His position illustrates the difference between the Oriental and European outlook. The story might provoke sniggers here, but in Cambodia it is accepted as perfectly ordinary. A local statesman asked me questions about the Duke of Windsor: there was only one thing he could not understand—why the Duke wanted to *marry* Mrs. Simpson.

King Norodom was educated at Saigon and at the Saumur School of Cavalry in France—he is a first-class horseman. He holds the honorary rank of brigadier-general, but is substantively a captain of the reserve.

He was largely responsible for the new Constitution—which, though experience may suggest amendments, represents a remarkable advance from the old days of absolute rule. The National Assembly is elected by men of 20 and over: and if so far it has failed to appreciate its responsibilities, one day it will.

Cambodia has five delegates to the Assembly of the French Union: one of them is a woman—a princess. Ministers can be chosen from within or without the Assembly, and are entitled to speak—and to be called upon to speak—in both houses.

The country is divided into fourteen provinces, each with a governor responsible for public order. Social development is backward, but has begun. Ordinary elementary schools are used by 70,000 boys and 15,000 girls, and in the whole country there are only four secondary schools and one teachers' training college—it cannot be claimed that the demand for education is as keen as in Vietnam. In addition, there are 1,400 Pagoda schools with 65,000 pupils: here the education has a religious basis, but it includes reading and writing.

For higher education, students must go to Hanoi, Saigon or France. A more liberal policy of scholarships is now in being, but the real problem is to create the desire. The very men

PATROL  
In the rice swamp



In the jungle

Cambodian  
Chasseurs on  
elephant patrol



Combined  
Operations:  
landing craft in  
the rice swamps





House in Laos



Rural bridge of bamboo

who shout the loudest for release from French 'bondage' do least to encourage the supply of doctors, technicians and the like who will be essential if Cambodia is to control her own destiny.

At present the medical organization is almost entirely dependent on the French.

A beginning has been made with agricultural banks and credit societies with a view to purging the country of that Oriental incubus, the money lender. The official interest rate of 12 per cent may seem high to us, but is modest compared with the usurer's 150 per cent or more. Again the difficulty is to *persuade* the peasant to abandon traditional practices. The official report refers to 'certain difficulties in the fight against ancestral customs unfortunately deep-rooted'.

The cultivation of rice is outstandingly the basis of Cambodian economy. The annual production averages 1,300,000 tons, of which about 300,000 are exported. Were the Cambodian peasant more enterprising, this could be greatly increased, for there is no land shortage.

Other crops include maize, many fruits, soya beans and ground-nuts. Palm sugar yields 30,000 tons a year, castor oil 6,000 tons—which must be quite a lot, for this product! There is some cotton, kapok, jute, coffee and tobacco, all capable of extension. Rubber, a recent innovation, has attained 20,000 tons a year. Timber is plentiful and good.

The country has over a million head of cattle, 450,000 buffaloes (there *seem* to be more!), 800,000 pigs and 4,000,000 poultry. The export of hides is a rising source of income. Fishing is a major industry, its products exceeding 100,000 tons a year. Much of it is dried and exported.

As strict Buddhists, the Cambodians are forbidden to kill anything. There are usually ways around any such precept. Once in Burma I met a Buddhist fisherman. "I don't *kill* the fish," he insisted. "I just take them out of the water. If they are foolish enough to die——"

The bonzes are vegetarians, but the laymen are not. Though they would not dream of killing a bullock, they see no reason not to eat it if the sin of the slaughter rests on another head. Religious conventions can, however, render shopping difficult. The local butchers are usually Chams. But the Chams are



Moslems—they will slaughter cattle, but not pigs. For pork you must enquire at a Chinese shop. And most of the fishermen are Vietnamese.

Industry in the Western sense scarcely exists: local products are the result of artisan methods. However, needs are simple and few—the value of exports far exceeds that of imports. In fact, Cambodia is the only state of Indo-China which is able to balance its own budget!

"If only we could get rid of this war!" said a minister. "Our trouble is the same as yours in Malaya. I doubt if there are more than eight or nine thousand Viet Minh in the whole country, but we can't bring them to action. Hence we waste tens of thousands of men in garrisons."

"And the Khmer Issarak?"

"The Viet Minh are one of the excuses for their existence. Nationalism is another. But we are all Nationalists these days. If the Viet Minh war were over, we could soon persuade the Issarak to work with us. But, alas, the Viet Minh war does not depend upon us!"

#### IV

But from the chronological point of view I am running ahead of my journey. I gathered my information about the Cambodian state on my return to Phnom Penh.

When I arrived in the capital from Saigon in a borrowed car, I proposed to continue the following day to Siem Reap. I made this quite clear to the Cambodian driver. He agreed to await me at 7 a.m., and I gave him a note to the garage to cover his petrol supplies.

But at 7 a.m. he was missing. And at 8 a.m. I began to telephone: he had not reported at the garage. No one had seen him, or could find him.

(Later the mystery was solved, and revealed a facet of the Cambodian character. He had simply gone home. On consideration, the idea of working on two consecutive days proved too horrible to contemplate, so without a word to anyone he went home! I discovered later that he came to fetch me on the following morning, evidently imagining that I would wait for him.)

On the previous evening I had paid my courtesy call on the French High Commissioner; he was another Corsican, and when we talked of his home town our conversation rapidly ceased to be formal. Hence, when on leaving he said the usual, "If there's anything you need, you have only to ask," it did not sound like a conventional platitude.

So at 10 a.m. I rang him up and told him of my misfortune in losing my car and driver. Could he possibly lend me a car?

"I could," he agreed willingly, "but you couldn't get to Siem Reap to-day by road—it's a poor road in places, and closes at dusk. But I have a private aircraft for my official duties——"

I was whisked out to the airfield. There awaited me a pilot, M. Robert Santais, a man as big as myself. Beside him was one of the smallest aircraft I had ever seen, a flying flea. It seemed impossible that the two of us could get inside it, but we did—and there were two empty seats behind us.

M. Santais was quite obviously a first-class pilot. He had the machine in the air long before I had even thought of displaying passport and visas. The aircraft was a Beechcroft Bonanza—he told me that it was popular in U.S.A. for private purposes. We flew steadily over flat country: then a large lake.

"Tonlé Sap," he announced. "Yes, big, but not deep—not now, at low water—only a couple of metres deep. Those enclosures you see are not nets, but plaited wicker."

"For fishing?"

"Yes, the lake consists of two-thirds fish and one-third water. The fishermen just go into their enclosures and net the fish out. You notice that there are even arrows showing the fish which way to go in!"

There were two or three 'floating villages' on the lake—some on piles, others on sampans. Otherwise the scene was very monotonous. "Oh, you didn't miss anything by not going by road," he said.

The flying flea was beautifully steady—until in the last ten minutes, when we flew into a tropical storm. Then it was tossed about by irregular air currents. I should have been frightened had not Santais been so calm. Eventually he pointed to a small airstrip in the middle of the jungle.



"This is it," he said, as he made a perfect landing in the blinding rain.

There was a small hut on the edge of the jungle, but nobody in it.

"And what do I do now?" I asked.

"Just wait. It's too far to carry your bag. I'll waggle my wings over the town."

He appeared confident that this mystic rite would achieve some effect, and prepared to leave. "And don't worry about tigers," he grinned. "They won't come here—they don't like the smell of petrol!"

I sat down to wait. Sure enough, within half an hour two jeeps arrived—the local Security Officer and an army captain had seen the wagging wings, and accepted them as a sign that something at the airstrip needed investigation.

A week later I returned by road. It was indeed monotonous—and one stretch very bad. Apparently a typhoon had removed a hundred kilometres or so of the surface, and the authorities had not yet found the time or money to put them back.

## V

On my return to Phnom Penh I heard the king make a speech: he can carry off an occasion very well. He referred to the 'important results' achieved in recent negotiations with France, adding that there were some questions to be settled with Vietnam and Laos, but there was no suggestion of undue difficulty.

In some quarters the speech was greeted with relief. The king had recently returned from a tour of U.S.A. and Canada. There he had opened a campaign against the French: taking advantage of the traditional American dislike of anything savouring of colonialism, he declared that the conditions offered by the French did not amount to real independence, that this fact was so greatly resented by his people that he was uncertain whether he could mobilize the country in the event of a Viet Minh invasion.

The French seem to have been taken by surprise. The king had visited Paris in March 1953, had made his plaint to the

President, and had then agreed to set up a Franco-Cambodian Commission to consider differences. It consisted of H. E. Penn Nouth, the Cambodian Prime Minister, and M. Tezenas du Montiel, Director-General of the Ministry for the Associated States. On May 9th this submitted an agreed report.

This, followed by the king's speech, apparently consolidated French hopes of agreement—especially as the Viet Minh invasion of Laos had shown that Cambodia was also threatened. But a month later the king suddenly went into voluntary exile in Thailand, to draw the attention of the world to Cambodia's grievances: his Prime Minister claimed that he was 'ulcerated by French tergiversations'.

The equivocations were duly listed. One referred to French slowness to reach decisions and under-estimation of Cambodian demands. The military position was quoted as a case in point. It so happened that I had had a lengthy conversation with one of the king's staff on this issue. He said that the king wished to command all forces in his country. The French were, of course, quite willing that he should command Cambodian units, as was his right: but they were reluctant to hand over the command of their own forces to a man whose substantive rank was captain of reserve.

The Prime Minister stated that on his mission to Paris he had been obliged to negotiate with 'minor officials without mandate'. But the director-general, or permanent secretary, of a department cannot be described as a minor official. Nevertheless, someone in Paris showed a sad lack of imagination and knowledge of the Eastern mind. It will be recalled that in 1939 Britain sent a Foreign Office official to negotiate with Russia on a pact against the Nazis. He was at least as competent as any cabinet minister, but the Russians thought that they were being slighted. In the Orient 'face' is still a matter of great importance.

The king also referred to the French unilateral action in devaluing the piastre—I shall discuss this later, and suggest that his criticism was largely justified. He claimed that Vietnam was also making unilateral decisions on matters which should be jointly decided by the three states of Indo-China. He also stated that his recent tour of Cambodia had revealed that many people were coming to regard him as a virtual tool of the French,



and that his 'compromises' were the chief obstacle to the real independence of the country.

The king may have had grounds for some of his complaints, but his method of dealing with them was the depth of folly. Such a confession of division and weakness was almost an open invitation to the Viet Minh. He surely forgot one essential: he can always negotiate with the French, but not with the Viet Minh.

Careless talk is not confined to foolish babblers in wartime. "If Cambodia cannot secure her independence peacefully, she may have to use other means." Such a declaration, from a man in high authority, is an open invitation to violence.

Some of the ministers openly proclaimed their ambition—not only independence, but secession from the French Union. They can claim this if they so wish, but would be extremely foolish. It seems inevitable that Cambodia has to pass through many stresses and strains, internal and external. When these develop, the men who now talk loudest will be the first to squeal for help.

However, the king's flight to Siam was brief. The Siamese are traditionally anti-French, but they had no desire to acerbate an already disturbed situation—and, with Communist infiltrations into their country already begun, they might need French help themselves, and that urgently. So they hinted to King Norodom that their country could not be used as a base for political propaganda. He did the sensible thing, and went back to Cambodia.

But not to Phnom Penh. He stayed at Battambang, where some of the ex-Issarak bands rallied round him. The Viet Minh reaction to the whole episode was significant. The king was dismissed as a 'puppet', and a proclamation called for the 'freedom' of the Khmer people. An exactly similiar announcement preceded the invasion of Laos. King Norodom would not be the first monarch who has sacrificed his country to his pride. Yet it is strange that, after so many clear warnings, men still fall into the same trap.

The French could legitimately stand on their dignity: but for them the sensible thing would be to remove such grievances as are real.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# THE LOST CITY OF ANGKOR

### I

NEARLY a hundred years ago a French traveller named Mouhet was making his way through the forest jungle north of the great lake of Cambodia, Tonlé Sap. His attention was attracted by a clump of trees of unusual shape, and he went to investigate. He found that the trees were entwined around huge stones, and as he ripped away the leaves for closer examination he exulted, for he knew he had discovered the lost city of Angkor.

It was probably about 1000 B.C. that Aryan tribes from Persia conquered India: their successors, inheriting their zest for travel and conquest, continued to move eastwards, and by 200 B.C. had overrun what is now Cambodia, then inhabited by Khmer tribes.

The invaders brought their own gods. The Persians already had their Vedas, divine beings who rule physical phenomena, and they had now adopted Hindu deities. Among these were three supremely powerful gods—Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, and hundreds of minor spirits. This lax sect of Brahminism was predominant in Cambodia, but later was replaced by the more orthodox Little Vehicle of Buddhism.

With the Indian religion had come the Indian culture, including types of architecture. None of the earlier forms of this have survived, for the Khmers built in wood. But, as the Khmer kingdom gathered its strength, and added its own imprint to Indian forms, more durable materials came into use. The earliest permanent buildings were in brick, polished and so shaped that they fitted exactly—using not mortar, but as adhesive a powerful vegetable glue whose secret has been lost. Next came slabs of red laterite from the sub-soil, rough and riven with innumerable tiny channels like worm-holes: the rock is strong, but as it cannot be carved, it was used only for walls



and roofs. Finally the architects imported grey stone from far away.

It was about A.D. 900 that Angkor became the Khmer capital. There are few survivals of this period—one or two temples, and part of a vast reservoir. The new city had its calamities—a Cham fleet once sailed up the Mekong to the great lake to sack it. But Jayvarnan VII (1181-1201) began rebuilding in earnest, and the Angkor of to-day belonged to him and his immediate successors. The main city was established behind a great wall and moat, but additional temples were scattered around it: and, for that matter, in other parts of Cambodia—Angkor, as capital, simply housed most—and the finest—of the great buildings.

Jayvarnan was a Buddhist, but some of his descendants added other gods to the temples—one even had the statues of Buddha removed from the decorations. It is believed that in the main the city of Angkor Thom resembled the older capital.

Like most of its kind, the kingdom had its great days, its influence spreading far beyond its own borders. Then, weakened by the inevitable internecine rivalry of local potentates, it declined: at the same time it suffered from pressure by its neighbours. Of these the most powerful was Siam.

Angkor was less than a hundred miles from the Siamese border, hopelessly exposed and indefensible. Hence the king decided to move his capital eastwards. In 1432 it was suddenly abandoned. It was as simple as that. One year it was the home of hundreds of thousands of people—one temple alone had 80,000 dependants. The next year it was deserted.

It was ringed about by forest and jungle: these, now unchecked, began a slow advance over the cultivated fields into the city itself. Nor were they halted by the buildings. Where a seed could find soil to fertilize, there it grew. Trees flourished in the middle of courts or interstices of walls, and in their growth they forced up floors or flung down walls. Within two generations Angkor had been swallowed up by the forest.

Of course, it was not at once lost. There still lived people whose fathers had told them of its wonders. Peasants still stumbled across its great stones—then fled in fear, lest the gods who had condemned the city to death should be angry. Gradually Angkor was relegated to the realm of legend: as such

sixteenth-century Portuguese missionaries heard of it: and some Eastern scholars knew of its ancient glory, from contemporary accounts written by ancient travellers.

For more than four hundred years it was hidden by the dense forest, its temples overwhelmed by the great trees. Then came its rediscovery: French savants journeyed to its site, and gasped in wonder at what they saw: and in delight at the possibilities of reconstruction—an expanding tree might push over a wall, but the stones lay where they fell, and could be replaced. First the forest must be driven back—square miles of it had to be cleared. Then restoration began, simply but with infinite pains. And now the glories of Angkor are available to any traveller who cares to visit them—one of the wonders of the world, rivalling even the monuments of ancient Egypt.

## II

I had the best of companions at Angkor—Maurice Quétel-Colomb, the French Cultural Attaché for Cambodia—a tall bearded Savoyard. On ancient ruins he was erudite.

There are five gateways in the ancient wall around Angkor Thom. Moreover many of its buildings stand within their own grounds—some behind their own walls or moats.

Dominating the centre of the city is the great temple called the Bayon. Its stone courtyards are dotted with shrines, culminating in a huge central sanctuary. Each temple is shaped like a narrow pyramid, for the Khmers did not understand vaulting: when they needed a roof, they pushed in a stone a few inches from the wall, then another a few inches farther. Thus all their roofs have a conical appearance.

The carving was done *after* the building was completed. The bas reliefs are striking, but the dominant figure is the four-faced king-god—a Khmer monarch who on his death was united with Siva. He faces to all points of the compass simultaneously, ready to aid his adherents wherever they may be. Many of the representations are colossal, twenty or thirty feet high.

We wandered to the adjoining temple of the Baphuon, a pyramid of masonry on a base of 425 by 125 metres. Once its centre was much higher, but its upper parts have perished or been



looted. Its decoration is remarkable—especially since it was so completely overrun by the forest that the first investigators entirely overlooked it. To reveal it enormous masses of earth and trees had to be removed.

The remains of the royal palace are scanty, but include another pyramidal temple, the Phimeanakes. Here again many of the buildings were at first of lighter materials—as holes for timber posts indicate. The front of the royal enclosure is a great terrace with reliefs of elephants on its enormous stone slabs. There are lions as well—a strange intrusion, since the nearest lions must be a few thousand miles away. True, those depicted are somewhat mythical—quite obviously the sculptor was not representing real ones.

The Terrace of Elephants commands the parade ground of Angkor, the main square of the town. It continues into the Terrace of the Leper King, taking its name from a statue of that unfortunate monarch. Our sympathy may not be called for, since his statue at least shows no sign of leprosy, and no one really knows how he got his name: and his inscription refers neither to a king nor leprosy, but to a judge in hell.

Those temples and terraces are only the beginning of Angkor Thom: their dates range over two centuries, from A.D. 900 onwards. There is a certain sameness in the architectural style, but inspection reveals a rapid development—especially in building methods, from brick to stone. Decoration is stylized. Entrance avenues are usually flanked by nagas, huge stone snakes which culminate in a hood bearing seven heads. In the older buildings the naga lies on the ground: later he is raised by short pillars and acts as a balustrade.

Other approaches are flanked by genii, demons to the right, good spirits to the left. The difference between their representations is slight but effective—the corners of the demon's lips turn down, those of the friendly gods turn up. The difference this suggests in their characters is remarkable.

A systematic visitor would approach Angkor historically, beginning at the little hill of Phnom Bakheng, the site of the first town: then out to Lolei and Bakong, the first temple to be built in stone—about A.D. 890. About the same date was built Phnom Krom, south of Siem Reap.

However, the more casual visitor prefers a climatic approach.

Some monuments get insufferably hot at certain periods of the day.

"Phnom Krom is on a hill," said Quézel-Colomb. "Let's leave at dawn, and visit it while there's air."

We reached the foot of the hill by 7.30 a.m. The climb was only about a thousand feet—not much to me, and nothing at all to a Savoyard. Yet by the time we reached the summit we were almost exhausted, so fierce was the heat and so thin the air. Yet here the temple has not been crushed by the forest, but weathered by the wind: we must have chosen a morning when even the wind was exhausted.

An early visit should certainly be paid to Ta Phrom, north of Angkor. This has been left as the jungle invaded it, to show what the whole city was like before it was rescued from the clutches of the forest. I went there by myself, but as I approached two half-naked Cambodians appeared from the jungle. They were not only cheerful but amazingly good-looking. They showed that they proposed to accompany me: there were evil spirits abroad, and it was not good for a man to wander alone. For any mortal dangers they had their cross-bows. One of them demonstrated. He pressed back the bow with his naked toes, and fitted the arrow along a crossed section of wood. He aimed at a tree fifty yards away, and the arrow struck it soundly with a terrific smack. Had I needed courage, this would have reassured me: these arrows were lethal weapons. One of my friends, encouraged by my interest, aimed at a colony of monkeys in the tall trees above us: he missed. His expression needed no words: "These damned monkeys just won't sit still!"

We wandered through the silent temple, a fantasy such as it had never yet been my fortune to encounter. On every hand were giant grey trees, locally called fromageries, some with enormous roots like the sails of ships, and some trailing along the ground like gigantic nagas, fifty feet long. Some grew sturdily in the open, others in the terraces or even in the temples, where they had pushed huge walls contemptuously down. Insolent giants of the forest reared themselves from the temple floor, carelessly toppling the altars over in their irresistible growth. This was a place to ponder over the power of Nature and the feebleness of man.



My two friends were excellent companions: time meant nothing to them. If I wanted to sit down for contemplation, they squatted behind me, their brown skins glistening in the rain which had now begun to fall. It was late afternoon, and the early darkness suggested thunder, frequent in this treacherous climate. I was sodden, but this was almost routine: whether with rain or sweat was impossible to determine.

The thunder broke. My companions huddled closer to me: the evil spirits were displeased. The crossbows hung listlessly from their wrists, useless against such enemies. Some of the corridors would have been gloomy even in sunshine; now they were dark and forbidding. For half a mile I stumbled along this unnatural medley of tree and stone. From time to time a shaft of lightning, incredibly vivid, illumined the scene: the reverberant thunder awakened the drowsy bats—which in and around Angkor must be numbered by the million: they squealed in a monotonous chorus in their fear, but none dared to stray without.

When I at length emerged at the eastern exit, between a double line of nagas, the rain was descending in straight lines with intense force: it almost hurt as it struck the skin. But my companions thought nothing of the rain, so I ignored it. At the moment of parting one of them tried to press his bow and arrow into my hands, so that I might protect myself against the perils of the forest. But I returned it gently: no forest peril would be foolish enough to venture out in such weather.

### III

I have mentioned only half a dozen of the two hundred monumental sites which have been cleared within a few miles of Siem Reap. Any one is a strange historical relic which deserves or commands a visit, yet all together form but a prelude to Angkor Vat, the Temple of Angkor.

King Suryavaraman did not attempt to build this within the walls of his city: he could not—it is far too big: he chose a site nearby, built a wall ten feet high and four miles long, and dug about it a moat two hundred yards wide. These enclose a site of more than five hundred acres, with accommodation for pilgrims by the hundred thousand.

The two gates let into the wall east and west are of stone, contrasting with the laterite wall, and are flanked by galleries. But the sight through the gate is staggering.

First an open space: then artificial ponds, their placid waters covered with lotus blooms, flanked by ancient guest houses and libraries: right and left, some modern monastery buildings, the yellow robes of the bonzes showing vividly against their brown drabness. Across the open space is a road paved with stone flags, ten yards wide and nearly a quarter of a mile long: a pilgrim's route—the finale to journeys which might be measured in hundreds of miles. At the end of the road, the giant mass of the temple itself—colossal and impressive; its beauty changing with every shade of light, its grey stone mottled by countless pale green lichens. Then it rises in all its majesty, gallery rising above gallery, to culminate in the towering bulk of the central sanctuary. This is a sight to draw a man from half-way round the world and make him feel glad that he came.

We were alone: there are seldom crowds at Angkor Vat, and the Viet Minh war had scared away even the usual trickle of visitors. There was a welcome absence of touts and guides: for the moment the temple was ours. It needed no technical explanation, but only imagination, to set the scene back seven hundred years, and to picture it thronged by the colourful peoples of old Cambodia.

The first gallery was before us, sheltered like a monastic cloister. Then I gasped in sheer astonishment. For the wall-ward side was covered with bas reliefs, as vivid and invigorating as if they had just been carved—incredible to think that they had survived untouched for at least 850 years. I wandered entranced by scenes of wonder. Many of them represented Hindu epics, brought into Cambodia and adopted by the Khmers: the battle of Kauravas and Pandavas: armies on the march, their chiefs in chariots or on elephants: the Kaurava general shot by an arrow. Then scenes from the legends of Vishnu: a sea battle, with great galleys in dreadful proximity: the sense of contest enhanced by realistic detail—a sailor falls overboard, and is instantly seized by a waiting crocodile. Then a more fantastic scene—the battle of the monkeys, allies of Rama, against the giants, soldiers of Ravana: the monkeys fight naked against the heavily armed giants, use their nimble



bodies to the full, and tear their adversaries to pieces: a grotesque picture, superbly executed.

The long gallery, in its great rectangle, was tantalizing—the temptation to examine each scene in intimate detail conflicts with the urge to hurry on to the next wonder. Over half a mile of history and legend in pictures of stone!

I suffered myself to be led away, mollified by a promise of return: across a green courtyard, by another rectangular gallery, a stone courtyard, and we were at the base of the central shrines. Twelve stairways ascend, with extraordinary steepness—this is a feature of all the Angkor temples: an ascent of 45 degrees is modest, and the steps are no more than a few inches wide. Our modern aim is to make it easy for people to go to church: the Oriental ancients made the way hard, so that when the sanctuary was at last achieved it would be the more esteemed.

There were many minor shrines: then, as the pyramid of buildings approached its majestic climax, a temple at each of its four corners, enclosing the massive central sanctuary, two hundred feet high. Once it had been roofed in metal, but this was looted after Angkor was abandoned: now its grey stones face stark to the sky.

Here the decoration is incidental. Its theme is homage to God rather than sensual or artistic attraction to the pilgrim. Hence it has great dignity in its simplicity, and a peculiar charm in the contrast between its intimate shrines and the vast mass of the whole. Imagine a temple four times the size of Trafalgar Square!

And it was staggering to realize that, only a few years ago, the whole of Angkor Vat was submerged beneath the forest tide. The stones trapped the flying dust of the plain: earth deposits formed in the crevices, and seeds found unexpected nurseries. When the French archæologists approached the problem of rehabilitating Angkor Vat, great trees were growing on the *tops* of the highest pinnacles!

#### IV

I must restrain myself on Angkor, or it will run away with my book. I have seen many of the acclaimed wonders of the

world, and some on close acquaintance are disappointing. But not this.<sup>1</sup>

Yet majesty can be overwhelming, and great monuments pall by their ubiquity. Fortunately there is ample light relief, for the region about Siem Reap teems with interest. This was once the heart of Cambodia: the irrigated plains about the great lake supported a vast population. Nearly all the works of irrigation have long since died of disuse, and to-day the district is very rural and provincial.

Siem Reap is an undistinguished little town, astride a modest river which forms the local bathing establishment. Men and women are most circumspect: they wade deep into the water in their cotton clothes: then, bending beneath its surface, wash each part of the body in turn—without the exhibition of so much as a square inch of unnecessary flesh.

The town does retain one distinction. Once the equivalent of the cinema in Cambodia was the shadowgraph play, and the puppets were made in Siem Reap. They still are, but to-day they are in greater demand as decorations—I noticed one in the king's palace. The material is split buffalo hide. An old man draws the traditional designs—the classical dancing girl, the monkey comedian, or the fish with a woman's head—to illustrate the old legends. Then two assistants chased out the gaps in the leather. For once in Indo-China the prices were very reasonable, and I gladly bought samples. What was more, the old man produced a screen to show me how they were used for their legitimate purpose.

Irrigation was represented by a series of lazy water wheels. The sluggish stream pressed gently against wooden paddles and forced the wheel round, and a succession of short bamboo pipes emptied in passing their fill of water into a trough. This at least was the theory: actually many of the pipes were choked and could not hold even a cupful of water: others missed the trough,

<sup>1</sup> There is a considerable literature on Angkor, mostly in French. The best known works are those of Victor Goloubcu, *Introduction à la connaissance d'Angkor*, and *Le Temple d'Angkor Vat* (Editions Van Oest). An account by a British visitor appears in *East of Siam* by H. A. Franck (Appleton-Century, 1926). There is a useful pocket guide in French or English by H. Parmentier (published by Albert Portail, Saigon). But students will prefer the erudite publications of the *Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient*, which carried out the excavation and reconstruction of the temples.



and their water fell back to rejoin its mother river. Occasionally I saw men working a contrivance resembling the Egyptian *shadoof*, raising buckets of water to higher land.

I saw my first villages on the way to the small but lovely temple at Banteay Srei. My jeep hastened along a road, turned more leisurely on to a track, then sauntered along a sub-track. Pradah was typical of the villages of the neighbourhood—one long street of widely spaced houses on stilts; each had a bedroom enclosed within bamboo matting walls, a living-room under the same roof but with open walls, and a lean-to shack as a kitchen. This was life at its simplest, but no one asked for more. As in Laos, any man can have more land for the taking, but there is a complete absence of ambition: a man will work sufficiently hard to provide for his family, but no more.

Most of the children were naked, and liked it. The men wore sarongs, the women a brief skirt with a cotton camisole: or, sometimes, a sarong suspended from above the breasts: or even a skirt and nothing more. The modesty of the town was not noticeable here. I saw a group of girls taking their baths in the village pond, but they removed their simple clothing first. They were comely and shapely girls, but no one gave them a second glance.

Beyond the village and its immediate fields stretches the eternal forest-jungle. However, it provides good hunting. The villagers are not very interested in big game. One man carried home a brace of birds of the guinea fowl species: another had killed a peacock. Evidently Brahmin influences had contaminated strict Buddhism!

Another day we followed the course of Siem Reap's river to the lake, for I wanted to see one of the floating villages. The narrow valley was green and almost picturesque, but the road halted abruptly at a broken bridge.

"It can't be more than four or five kilometres," said Quézel-Colomb. "Let's walk."

Four or five kilometres should be nothing to grown men, but in the heat they can be exhausting. By the lakeside the atmosphere was almost insufferable. It was not merely the heat and the humidity, but the all-pervading smell of ancient fish. The local people dry it and sell it some distance away, or convert it into the loud sauces beloved by Vietnam or Chinese customers.

Since every house is engaged in the preparation of one or the other, or both, the odour can be imagined.

The village is movable. We had passed derelict houses by the bridge—they would be occupied later, for at high water the river overflows hundreds of square miles of land. At the river mouth is a *mélange* of stilted houses and cabined sampans: half a mile out into the lake is another village on piles, and farther out still a real floating village consisting of lines of sampans.

A boatman rowed us out in a crude flat-bottomed craft, and we breathed the steam rising from the lake. The jost about Tonlé Sap being two-thirds fish and one-third water appeared no more than a slight exaggeration. I never saw so many fish. I cannot claim that I put my hand in the water and grabbed one, but I should imagine that this was no impossible feat. Why it was necessary to erect piscatorial enclosures and sign posts was beyond me. Fish in such crowds would surely be only too glad to give themselves up to avoid a slow death from thirst!

A bus proposed to carry us back to the bridge. Its passengers were local women. I am not at all snobby, and would have been glad of their company, but each carried a large basket of dried or sauced fish. I preferred even the sticky walk to a ride in such company.

When finally I returned to the capital at Phnom Penh, the rain decided against me. Part of the road was bad, and the rest was rapidly becoming worse. By the time a police officer at Kompong Thom had stopped my jeep because it was not travelling in convoy, I had ceased to care. I did not believe that the most desperate of Issarak bandits would care to operate on such a day.

Then, as we approached the capital, the weather made its sudden Oriental change, and flooded the Mekong valley with sunshine. Here again was a region of green peace—but most of the peasants taking advantage of the river's overflow were Vietnamese or Malays. With the Chinese controlling their trade, there is something in the complaint of the Cambodians that they are being pushed out of their own country. But it is their own fault: if you do not make use of your own possessions, the modern fashion is for someone to deprive you of them.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### SCRAPBOOK

**B**EFORE we plunge further into the complications of Indo-China, here are some oddments from my notebooks which do not fit naturally into any chapter. Some will serve as light relief: others raise more serious points.

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I chuckled at a casual recollection as I landed at Saigon airport. I was last there in 1947, and while changing aircraft ran into Compton Mackenzie, who was visiting Eastern battlefields prior to writing his history of the Indian army during the war. We were both using R.A.F. transport aircraft, which were not exactly comfortable. Where they had seats at all, these were of very hard metal. But Mackenzie had coped most ingeniously. As he walked across the airport he wore over his chest and shoulder, like a bandolier, an inflated motor tube: this he transferred to a more appropriate position when taking his place on board.

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I have mentioned that Indo-China was expensive, partly because of an absurd rate of exchange. Not merely were things very dear—in Hanoi (which must be about the most expensive place in the world to live in) local pork cost 11s. a pound, imported beef and mutton 19s., sometimes more: a bottle of lemonade from a stall cost 1s. 8d., in a hotel 4s. But to the European idea the proportions were wrong.

In a modest hotel in Europe you might read on the menu: 'Steak 4s., fried potatoes 6d.' Or, as often as not, the potatoes are thrown in without visible extra charge. But in a very

modest restaurant in Saigon the same item read: 'Steak 25 piastres, fried potatoes 10 piastres.' (The legal value of the piastre was fourpence.) In the capital of Laos the comparison was even more startling: 'Steak 14 piastres, fried potatoes 20 piastres.' 6s. 8d. for a portion which you would get for three-pence in a paper bag from the local fish and chip shop! For some reason, mashed potatoes were charged at 25 piastres.

The explanation was, of course, that vegetables had to be carried over long distances. At Saigon, for example, they are brought from Dalat, often by air. Yet even this did not justify the fantastic charges. One of the few British residents in Hanoi told me that he did all his shopping in Hong Kong, 500 miles away. Even after he had paid for air transport, he got his food supplies at less than 20 per cent of the local prices.

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A fragment of conversation between two French journalists accidentally overheard soon after my arrival at the press camp at Hanoi:

"Is that big man American?"

"No. He can't be—he speaks French."

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Insects are one of the plagues of the East. One party I attended was ruined by the flying ants. The women had to comb out their hair, and the unfortunate dog nearly went mad at the irritation in a dozen places at once.

I slept only one night without a mosquito net. Then I was bitten so badly that next morning my sheet was liberally daubed with blood.

On the other hand, the display staged by the fireflies of the Red River delta gave me great pleasure.

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A soldier pulled a long face as he drank his issue of wine.

"Powdered stuff!" he complained.

"What?"



"They reduce the wine to powder in France, send it here, add water to it, and claim that it becomes wine again. This stuff, wine! And me, it is understood, I am from Burgundy, from Beaune."

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An elderly Vietnamese savant: "In a gift, the giving is most important. The value of the gift is a trivial issue in comparison. If a rich man makes a gift to a poor relative, but at the same time exhibits his enormous wealth, the reaction is not necessarily that of gratitude, but of envy—'Is that all he can give?'

"The generosity of the Americans is outstanding. I know it and you know it. But the mass of the people do not know it, because the Americans have not yet acquired the true art of giving. It is only too obvious that their gifts have a purpose—to keep Vietnam away from the Communist fold. That is to say, they are bribes, and are only valued accordingly.

"One day the Americans will appreciate how little they have gained from so much generosity—and how much more *could* have been gained by a little elementary study of the Eastern mind: especially of the peasant mind."

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The same, on another occasion: "I am an Asiatic, but I confess that I was disgusted by the behaviour of the Chinese here in 1945-6. They looted everything, whether it belonged to the state or to individuals. They stole valuable woodwork to burn on their fires. They betrayed very low standards of life and of mentality—it was quite obvious that they were unaccustomed even to the modest standards prevailing here in Hanoi.

"By comparison, the Japanese behaved very correctly during their occupation."

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A Vietnamese who had seen the war from many angles: "The first wave of a Viet Minh attack is the worst. Rape, looting, murder—there is no lack of any of the horrible attendants of war.

"But if you do survive the first attack, then you are fairly safe. You are reasonably treated in a prison camp—for the idea is, not to punish you, but to convert you.

"Nor must all the horrors be credited to the Viet Minh. Generally the French are well disciplined and behave remarkably well in what are very difficult circumstances. But on occasion their colonial troops run wild.

"This is unfortunate—for men remember the atrocities of the other side rather than of their own."

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Naturally I was interested in authorship and publishing in Vietnam.

There are about twenty publishers in the country, operating under rather difficult conditions—for, since most literate people can read French as well as Vietnamese, competition is keen. Some Vietnamese authors actually write in French so as to gain a wider market!

Most of the local books are light fiction. There are published a few political or philosophical works—with the contrast between East and West as the favourite theme—but generally a reader in search of culture goes to the French for it.

The publisher usually buys the rights for an edition of 2,000 copies. Sales are still very small—5,000 would mark a best seller.

Yet the prospects are promising. Vietnam is a young state, with a mass literate population just forming. Education at the moment is rather rudimentary, and far from universal, but the prospects are good. Within a generation there should be a large literate population in Vietnam, and a demand for literature follows almost automatically. It would be possible to compare the country with the England of about sixty years ago.

There are already a number of cultural societies, of high quality, but their membership is usually confined to intellectual circles. The mass movement should follow—but will be subjected to intensive competition from wireless and the cinema: especially the cinema.

But, assuming that the Cao Dai reflect the tendency of modern thought in Vietnam, the example of Victor Hugo ought



to encourage local authors. It is common for authors to be underpaid, but very uncommon for an author to be made a saint!

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A university professor at Hanoi: "I doubt if we have given enough thought to be *persistence* of Viet Minh propaganda.

"Students are notoriously Nationalist. In 1946 hundreds of our young men rushed to join Viet Minh, believing that it stood for a free and democratic Vietnam. Practically none go now.

"Of those who went, some came back, seeing another and more peaceful way to independence, by agreement. But the rest—they are the ones who concern me—I have seen some who have been taken prisoner. They left here ardent Nationalists: they are now ardent Communists."

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Whoever is making the money in Indo-China, it is not the French civil servant. His numbers have been greatly reduced, and his salary is quite inadequate to the very high cost of living.

"I just can't work out how you manage to exist," I said to one, when I had learned something of local prices.

"I couldn't—but my wife goes out to work as well," he said. "The good Lord help those of my colleagues whose wives have young children and have to stay at home. And yet, according to Communist propaganda, we are the people who are despoiling the country!"

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The prestige of Britain was high. I have mentioned that the example of India was quoted to me very frequently. Local intellectuals showed a lively and appreciative interest in our internal affairs.

"Your discipline! It is easy to apply controls during a war, but *after* a war—that is very different."

"I admire your illogic," said another. "Your ideas of revolution, for example. You killed an autocratic king—but now you

esteem your monarchy more highly than any other nation does!"

Absence of logic is a feature of many judgments. "The Americans are trying to insinuate themselves into a position of virtual control here," said a Vietnamese civil servant. "Think of it—their Embassy has a staff of over five hundred, while the British Legation has only twenty-five."

I had to point out that the American staff included a large mission directing aid supplies to Vietnam.

True, as Americans have candidly pointed out, the administration expenditure of their aid programmes has been absurdly high. It is possible to make gifts without logistics.

I owe the Russians an apology.

When I arrived in Saigon I mentioned their interest in my journey and the appointment of Dr. Le Van Tam to investigate my real purpose.

"I think I know the man you mean," said a Security Officer. "You haven't got the name exactly, but everything else fits. I didn't know with precision that he was a Viet Minh adherent, but he has been a leader of the 'fight for peace' crusade, which is suggestive.

"I think that he's harmless, but if you have any trouble with him——"

I thought that I could deal with him myself—but then forgot all about him in the interest of my journey.

I went back to Saigon for my final week of interviews and checking information. I have mentioned how expensive the city was, and by this time my allotment of currency was almost exhausted. Then, luckily, a friend found me a flat—miraculously empty for just the week I needed. So I lived in comfort, and rent free.

On my last day I remembered that on one of my earlier visits I had left a parcel at the hotel, so went round to collect it.

"Oh, you've had a caller," said the hall porter. "A man has been in to see you three or four times, but you didn't leave an address, so I couldn't tell him anything."

"What was his name?"



"Let me see. He was a doctor—Dr. Le Van Tam, or something like that."

In my last few hours in Saigon I tried hard to find him, but failed. However, I now offer a full report on my journey to the Russians, in the form of this book. It is surely very much fuller than anything their local agent would have been able to compile. But I am genuinely sorry that I missed him.

Nevertheless, he was not very enterprising. The hall porter did not know my movements, but plenty of people in Saigon did—including the local newspapers.

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One does not expect long hours and energetic labour in government offices in a very hot climate, but sometimes I wondered how anything got done at all. Most of our own public holidays are based on religious feasts, and the French have always been more wholesale than we have in such observances: in Indo-China, as I have shown, there is a great variety of religions. Confronted with such a grave problem, the authorities decided to observe the religious feasts of *all* the local sects. All have agreed that Sunday shall be the regular weekly holiday, but it is an unusual week which does not include at least one feast day of one religion or another. I raised my eyebrows when I found that Vietnamese Confucianists took a holiday on Ascension Day, while French Christians celebrated the birth of Buddha. In some circumstances this might merely be comic, but in a country ravaged by war, and with so much to be done, it seemed to me pathetic. How can the masses be roused to action when civil servants break off work to celebrate some feast which is meaningless to them? Here there is an opportunity for a drastic process of waking up. Such trifles have an effect far beyond their real worth.

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I flew out to Saigon and back home by Air France. The service was excellent, and the large and comfortable Constellation air liner cruised above any bad weather.

The meals were memorable. We left Saigon at 6.45 a.m..

local time—we were, of course, flying with the sun. We were served with *petit déjeuner* over Cambodia, refreshments over Siam, and a full breakfast at Calcutta. The latter included two eggs, and my enjoyment was so obvious that the waiter brought two more without asking. More light refreshments followed—all drinks were free and on demand throughout the journey—followed by a hot chicken lunch while flying at 17,000 feet over India. An early dinner awaited us at Karachi, followed by a light supper over Iraq. Then we had to make do with light refreshments until we reached Damascus, where we enjoyed a cooked breakfast to the accompaniment of a band, with a dance floor and taxi girls available between the cereal course and the ham and eggs. (Incidentally, I noticed the tact of the air hostess when some Pakistan travellers joined us at Karachi: without prompting or asking if they were Moslems, she assured them that the sandwiches she offered them were *not* ham: she had taken the ham from their plates.) More light refreshments, a second substantial breakfast at Rome, and we were suitably placed to survive until we reached Paris. We were due there at 10.50 a.m.—and touched down at 10.49.

Then I discovered that my bags had been specially placed so that I could be instantly transferred to the next aircraft to London.

If only some of the assured competence of Air France could be transferred to some organizations in Vietnam!

Easily the favourite sport of Vietnam is—association football. This pastime is now almost universal.

The local players are very agile, and the game is taken at a great pace. A few Scottish players as tactical advisers would greatly improve the local teams.

In the villages any oddments of ground are pressed into service, and I saw fields of weird shapes—one was of normal width at one end, but at the other end the corner flag stood just at the edge of the penalty area. Rural footballers usually play without boots—but they kick the ball hard with the instep.

I saw boys playing another game not unlike badminton. They used a crude shuttlecock, but they *kicked* it over the cord



which served as a net. Their agility and accuracy were amazing—especially when they back-heeled the missile with great force and skill.

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One of my Vietnamese drivers considered anything below 120 kilometres an hour to be crawling: like all his kind in every country, he was full of complaints about everybody else on the road. Apart from the fact that I wanted to stop frequently to talk to people, the speed appeared excessive on a road which had recently had the worst of an encounter with a typhoon. Hardly surprising that he broke off his exhaust—I marvel that it was not the axle.

Now our car made a noise like a tank in full cry. Above forty miles an hour it sounded like a whole squadron of tanks. The effects were startling. People jumped for safety at our approach: even buffaloes hurried themselves: and lorry drivers, who had contemptuously ignored our klaxon, now hastened towards the nearest gutter.

My driver beamed with delight. Why had he never thought of this before? My forecast was that his exhaust was due for a constant series of fractures.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### NO SOLUTION?

#### I

THE foregoing chapters were actually written in Indo-China. They consist of descriptive reportage, information—checked wherever possible—and a few ideas. It is now time to consider the broader implications of the situation: to avoid the annoyance of reference back, I shall risk an occasional piece of recapitulation.

We have seen how the war in Indo-China grew—a confused struggle emanating from an inevitable demand for self-government, but eventually being adopted and controlled as part of a Communist plan: similarly the French resistance, which at first savoured of old-fashioned colonialism, has changed into a defence of fundamental rights—of the local people rather than of the French. The war is confusing, too, in its tactics and strategy: a guerrilla war seldom has form. I met few people who would risk a hazard as to its conclusion. "There is no solution!" I met this despairing cry again and again.

It comes easily from tired and over-strained people, but is it true? Is a military solution impossible in Indo-China?

It is a battle between a heavy-weight and a feather-weight—lumbering force against light agility. The heavy-weight packs a terrific punch—if it lands, his opponent would be instantly knocked out. But the lighter man dodges, and allows himself to be chased all over the ring. Then, when the heavy-weight tires or begins to puff, the feather-weight essays some blows—light, but irritating, and from unforeseen angles.

Or another comparison. The French are like firemen equipped with the latest but cumbrous equipment. But now it appears that the fire is far from the road, and they cannot get their wonderful mechanisms up to it. To their chagrin, they find that a man with a bucket of water is more practical.



It is not merely the French equipment which has failed to meet the need, but its direction. The French have never been short of capable generals, but political restrictions imposed by the government in Paris appear to have had unfortunate effects. A defensive war can be even more costly than an offensive sweep. Had even a fraction of the present French Expeditionary Force been available at an earlier stage, the war would long have been over. But the piecemeal approach has been very expensive, and is still inconclusive. If you are attacked by an octopus, you do not concentrate your energy one by one on the tentacles about you—you strike at its heart. If there are mosquitoes in the house, a spray may kill a few of them, but a permanent riddance can only be effected by attacking the larva.

The French army is strong enough and well enough equipped to strike hard at the Viet Minh. But that is not enough—the enemy will temporarily disappear and avoid the blow: the victors must *occupy* effectively the ground gained. This is overwhelmingly important. The local people will never rally to the Vietnam government in any area where there is a risk that the Viet Minh may return: it would be suicidal to do so! This situation does not involve heavy equipment, but it does need very large numbers of lightly armed troops—for preference, Vietnamese troops.

Here the French have been laggard. I suspect that men with antiquated ideas sought to retard the growth of the Vietnam army lest it should be used against the French! At the moment this supposition is absurd—though it is true that every thoughtful Vietnamese is a Nationalist, he is not necessarily anti-French. He may be too dependent on his friends, for the French have tended to do too much for their protégés.

However, late in 1952, it was decided to raise fifty-four new Vietnamese battalions, and to train them on 'Commando' lines—that is, for light and extemporized operations against mobile Viet Minh units. The idea was good, and appealed to local people. Some of the battalions were already in action, and others were in full training. When they are ready, the first objective should be the complete clearance of Cochin China. The only really serious zone under Viet Minh control is the region south of Rachgia, in the extreme south-west of Vietnam. This is important since it yields 300,000 tons of rice annually, the bulk of

which goes to supply Viet Minh forces—I have suggested that, tactically, this is a rice war. With this and a few minor areas cleared and firmly controlled, the entire outlook in the south could change rapidly. Once it were firmly held, it could release thousands of men for service elsewhere.

Annam is more difficult. My sketch map on page 55 shows that it is divided irregularly. So far the Viet Minh have proved themselves superior in tactics in mountain areas—by disappearing in face of attack, to regather to form ambushes. In the mountains the French heavy equipment is sometimes a handicap rather than otherwise.

The key to victory lies in the Tonkin delta. I met no one who imagined that the Viet Minh could be driven from their mountains, but I saw no reason why the delta itself should not be more firmly held. At present it is the main source of Viet Minh supplies—by some estimates, 70 per cent of their food is smuggled from this region supposed to be under French-Vietnam control: and it is certain that the crowded delta population supplies a large proportion of their recruits. Since it is apparently impossible to bring the main Viet Minh forces to battle, the obvious alternative is to deny their supplies.

## II

The late General de Lattre de Tassigny is reported to have said that if he could have the Viet Minh commander, Vo Nguyen Giap, on his side, the war would be over in a month.

In this he was not paying an exaggerated compliment to his enemy's tactical skill: he was envious of the Communist's lack of scruples.

I never saw such a war, with villages in the front line—and the soldiers scarcely daring to disturb them: in one sector children from villages in the Viet Minh area came to school daily in the French zone! Peasants passed freely across the invisible 'line'. This suits the Viet Minh, who are drawing supplies and reinforcements *from* the delta: but it does not suit the French-Vietnamese command. They have been withheld from effective action by political argument—it is essential not



to alienate the local people, and so on: but unless a very much sterner line is taken, the war could go on for ever.

The delta triangle has a perimeter of about 300 miles—a long line to hold with the forces available. Yet I was far from convinced that the grip on the delta could not be tightened. Of course local people will be inconvenienced, and will protest. But that is preferable to an endless war.

The Vietnam government, I urged, should declare a 'curtain' a mile wide around the delta. No one should ever be permitted to cross this defensive ribbon—which would be protected by barbed wire, mines, electrified fences, and other defensive devices. Local peasants would be moved to other areas: presence in the forbidden zone would involve shooting at sight. Larger forces would be needed to patrol the zone thoroughly, but even with present resources the delta could be sealed off far more thoroughly than it is.

Within the delta discipline should be tightened—by the Vietnamese government, not by the French. Collaboration with the Vier Minh is of course punishable by law, but at present the law is hopelessly defied. Stern action could save thousands of lives: local traditions must be abandoned. As soon as the crops are gathered, for example, they should be transferred *at once* to central storehouses under adequate guard. Any collusion with the enemy should be firmly repressed. At present the idea prevails that a man must do the best he can for himself: no punishment is likely from the government: but on the other hand, if he does not obey Viet Minh orders, revenge is salutary. In such circumstances, and in the Orient, the correct measures are not a merciful liberalism but stern discipline.

I need not emphasize the importance of the conflict: and its condition is almost desperate. Yet a military decision is possible. The task of the French and Vietnamese is not easy, but that of the Viet Minh is intensely difficult.

In the country under their direct control they have practically no industry, and can only provide less than half their food requirements. They have drawn almost the whole of their military supplies from China: *but they have had to pay for them*. This has involved great sacrifices. Small quantities of minerals are found in the Tonkin mountains, and have been delivered to China. It was significant that the lightning invasion

of Laos took place after the opium crop had been gathered. As they retired, the Viet Minh took the whole of it, and thereby gained a credit in China of over a million pounds. Yet their steadiest export is rice. Since they cannot produce enough to feed themselves, this is an absurdity—they are buying their supplies by selling rice produced in the French-Vietnam areas!

Even if this traffic could be stopped, the Chinese Communists might continue the supplies, for they would not wish the revolt to collapse. But the propagandist effects would be considerable: China is still the hereditary enemy of Vietnam; sale of supplies is one thing, but a gift—in the East—presupposes undue influence or control.

If the delta could be completely closed for a year, or even less, Viet Minh might collapse for lack of food—or, failing that, be forced into some rash manœuvre. Already there are signs of strain in their organization. I was convinced that this could be greatly intensified by much firmer action on the government's part—tougher action, if you will.

For difficulties of supply could arouse remarkable reactions among the Viet Minh forces. We have seen that they are strangely composed. The bulk of the regular divisions consist of now thoroughly indoctrinated Communists: there are also Nationalists blinded by their own fervour. Hunger would not have a serious effect on these. But there are also tens of thousands of followers recruited by force or threats: these could be easily influenced by shortage of food—and would be tempted to go over to the side which offered it.

It is easy to make a solution sound much more simple than it is or ever could be. The situation is fantastically complicated. In the northern delta, not only villages but even families are divided—I often met men in the government forces who had brothers serving with the Viet Minh. So great is the confusion that an objection can be raised to every suggestion. Yet it is quite impossible for present conditions to continue indefinitely: to end them, the sterner outlook I have suggested is indispensable. Vietnam needs a leader of firm mind, with no thought of his own advancement, and utterly incorrupt, to administer the Red River delta, and to transform its bamboo curtain into something much more substantial and impenetrable.



## III

It will probably prove that the key to victory lies with the Vietnamese. They are not making use of all their chances.

Among their leaders are those who are still very suspicious of the French: they are strongly anti-Communist, but fear lest the promise of independence should be withdrawn. They cannot see that they have already gained their freedom from the French: and that if they lose the war they will pass under a servitude compared with which that of the French was trifling.

"In the last year 40,000 volunteers for the army had to be sent home because there was no equipment for them," exclaimed General Nguyen van Hinh, the Vietnam commander-in-chief.

I did not doubt his word: indeed, I know that his ambition is to build up a powerful army. ("Lots of the Viet Minh are not Communists at all," he argues. "They are misguided Nationalists. But they will never surrender to the French.")

Everybody agrees that Vietnam should provide a far bigger proportion of men for its own defence—at present the French supply about half. There was a time when the French were reluctant to raise strong local forces, but that is long past: they would welcome reinforcements, the more the better. So I set out to discover why the fifty-four battalions were not a hundred, or more. Everybody in Vietnam *talked* of the necessity for bigger forces, but not much was being done.

True, there is a very serious shortage of officers. While, as at Dalat, junior officers can be trained fairly quickly, regimental commanders and general officers form a real problem. Yet I got the impression that the real difficulty was economic. "The men are there, ready. But we have no money for their equipment—and no money to pay them. Practically the whole proceeds of our budget are already swallowed by the war."

This argument, which came from the highest quarters, needs examination. Every conversation included a hundred mentions of the word 'difficulty'—and not without reason. When a government is engaged in a war, and when half its country is under enemy control, the difficulties are only too apparent.



Baby monkey



The author plays with baby tigers



Bonzes at  
Vientiane, Laos





Angkor: a temple in the Bayon



Angkor: the forest engulfs the temple



Angkor: detail of bas relief; Khmer warriors against Chams



Angkor: the Temple of Angkor Wat

Even in prosperous times, a peasant state never has a great capacity of taxation. Under present conditions the revenue from the peasants must necessarily be meagre.

Yet no one who spent a week in a Vietnam town would believe that the limit of taxation had been approached, much less reached. There are signs of luxury and wealth such as are never seen in modern England—or France. Most people are better at avoiding taxes than at paying them—the Chinese especially are past-masters of this art. The French residents actually pay about 80 per cent of the direct taxes—since most are salaried and the tax is deducted from their pay. The bulk of the revenue comes from Customs and Excise receipts, and the quantity of luxury goods available suggests that the charges are too low. A single night's takings at the gambling halls of Cholon would equip a battalion or more.

There is one special war measure—a kind of purchase tax, on commercial dealings. It was recently doubled—and now stands at the colossal rate of 4 per cent! Compare this with British wartime standards! Further, the greater part of the country's business is in Chinese hands, and Chinese merchants do not need documents—their word is their bond. Thus it is immensely difficult to trace transactions, and the receipts from the tax are disappointing.

I heard many stories of people paying taxes both to Vietnam and to Viet Minh—and some of them were true. The victims always complained that they were 'forced' to subscribe to Viet Minh funds: I can imagine cases where this applied, but others where *attentistes* wanted to keep a foot in both camps, until the result was apparent. Here again much sterner disciplinary action was needed.

The fact is that only a minority of the Vietnamese realize that they are engaged in a life-and-death struggle. Such ignorance is not remarkable among the peasants, to whom the government is an hereditary tyrant, but it was surprising to find complacency in some intellectual circles.

"We need a Churchill!" exclaimed one man, importantly, then proceeded to expound a dozen reasons why he himself should do nothing. In the East the search for excuses for inaction is traditional.

Yet a man with Churchill's wartime singleness of purpose



would be a boon to Vietnam to-day. I had a long talk with the Prime Minister, Nguyen van Tam, who is the most forceful leader the country has yet produced. But before he took to politics he was a poet, with 400 published poems to his credit! He admitted that he has no time for poetry now.

Scion of a lower-middle class family, he was a law student who became a provincial administrator, noted for his sympathy with peasant aspirations—this at a time when such an outlook was scarcely fashionable. During the Japanese occupation he played an active part in a resistance movement centred at My Tho, but was eventually captured. Later he was for some months a prisoner of the Viet Minh, and had to resist the full weight of a programme of 're-education'. He was ill-treated, and two of his sons were shot, but he emerged with his spirit unbroken. In the new government he became Director of Public Security, then Minister of the Interior, and Prime Minister in June 1952.

Since then he has made a rapid advance in public esteem. He leads a very mixed coalition team, and it is known that he favours a programme of social reform very much wider than some of his colleagues envisage. It was he who first formed free trade unions; introduced the practice of democracy in municipal elections, and began the programme of agricultural reform—all these were only beginnings, true, but in Asia beginnings are difficult and important. Above all, he has realized the character of the struggle against Viet Minh, and has endeavoured to arouse his countrymen to its dangers.

He is a good-looking man, very cultured, with a strong face. He spoke confidently: the time would come when the Chinese wanted—or needed—peace: when they stopped supplies to the Viet Minh, the rebels would be so discouraged that the war would end within two years, probably much less. And he emphasized the Viet Minh difficulties—too often overlooked by leaders overwhelmed by their own. Their manpower is strained, he explained: they have only one man (or woman) working to ten fighting. I suggested that this was in violent contrast—almost the exact reverse—to Vietnam proper. I urged a general mobilization—not merely to raise more troops, but to inculcate the sense of crisis which the situation demands. He said that a

measure of compulsory national service was under consideration: like his son, the commander-in-chief, he believed that the war could only be won by a Vietnamese army.

"There is an old Buddhist saying, 'Do it for yourself!'" he quoted. "This is our country—why should we leave its liberation to the French? I feel for the French troops and their families, fighting in a cause which they can scarcely call their own. *We must win the battle.*"

He went on to develop the inevitable argument about lack of equipment and funds. Yet I cannot believe that another fifty thousand rifles would not be forthcoming if more battalions were formed. Their cost would be little more than that of a couple of tanks. True, the soldiers would have to be paid—by the Vietnamese, otherwise they would not form a true Vietnamese army.

Politically he is very sound. He is a patriotic Vietnamese, but sees no sense in a quarrel with France. He believes that he can reconcile the different Nationalist opinions, as month by month it becomes apparent that the independence of Vietnam is no mere pretence, but real. In all his speeches he appeals to Nationalists in the Viet Minh to come over and join him. In this crazy war he can be sure that his public audiences include a proportion of Viet Minh, and even more who have relatives with the rebels. His appeals have an effect, and over recent months there has been a steady flow of deserters from Viet Minh.

But he makes no appeal to Ho Chi Minh! He does not subscribe to the idea held in some quarters that it might be possible to arrange 'a deal' with the Communist leader. "Oil and water do not mix." He knows enough of Communist tactics to appreciate that collaboration is half-way to extinction. There will never be a place for Ho Chi Minh in a cabinet headed by Nguyen van Tam! Apart from the national issue, the Prime Minister has no cause to love his adversary, for two of his sons were murdered in appalling circumstances by the Communists.

If he could impart his spirit to the mass of the people, the atmosphere in Vietnam would change very rapidly and decisively. But even among his colleagues I found those who allowed private misgivings or political trivialities to cloud their



judgment on the essential issues. I agreed without hesitation that only a Vietnamese army could force a military decision. But so far not enough has been done to translate ideas into action.

A French patriot and author, Ernest Psichari, was killed in one of the earliest battles of the 1914 war. An intellectual, he made one forceful declaration: "The blood of heroes counts more than the ink of savants." There are circumstances when this is true. Ink will never stop the Communists. Liberty is never gained save by sacrifice. Failure to realize this is, I think, the cause of the comparative inertia among the Vietnamese: especially, I regretted to note, among their youth.

#### IV

"Certainly," a young man agreed. "But why should I fight for French colonialism? If the Viet Minh are beaten, do you suppose that the French will withdraw?"

Of course they will: they can do no other. They have already gone so far that any attempt to reverse the course of events would lead to a national uprising compared with which the present conflict is trifling—and which would inevitably end in a French defeat.

But I must emphasize that I found no body of French opinion which even suggested disregarding the treaties made with Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. All the views I met were to the exact contrary. The French Communists are not the only Parisians who suggest that French forces should be withdrawn immediately from Indo-China: the cry is also raised in some quarters of the extreme right—among the representatives of the old colonialism, now disgruntled at the costly and thankless task which France has undertaken.

Among the French I found almost every variety of opinion. One man of standing maintained that, although of course Vietnam would be an independent state, France would need the right to military bases, like U.S.A. in the Philippines—"not only to help defend Vietnam, but to retain for France a place in the Far East." Prestige in high politics can be bought at too high a price.

The French official class in general was not especially happy. It is not well paid, and intensely feels the difficulties of the transition period.

French merchants, once generally included in the colonialist school, were now frankly realistic. "The country has got to be independent—there's no argument about that. So we're simply concerned about our commercial interests. They will obviously depend on conditions at the break. If France and Vietnam part friends, then our trade will go on as usual—like yours in India. It is true that the Vietnamese need us as much as we need them. So our objective is to win the war and then to arrange a sweet and friendly transfer, leaving us with commercial rights. We don't expect special privileges, but we have the primary advantage that we are already settled here, and know local conditions."

French military opinion varied. To some of the troops the war was just another nasty job. But others were more far-sighted—clearer in their vision than some of the civilians. "This is not just a battle for Vietnam—it is part of the battle for the world. A Communist victory here would be a disaster for democracy. So we fight—and the French soldiers here are all volunteers!"

Most French weaknesses are to be found, not in Indo-China, but in Paris. There, local political issues are allowed to affect the course of events: a short-sighted outlook leads to appalling errors of judgment.

I witnessed one during my stay. I have suggested that one of the reasons for absurdly high prices was the over-valuation of the piastre. The local black market was quite open, and such organizations are at least a general guide to reality: the legal value of the piastre was seventeen francs, but anyone who had the right currency could buy piastres at half that price. This activity was costing the French Treasury many millions of pounds a year—since a man could buy piastres at eight francs and sell them to the Treasury at seventeen—a satisfactory profit! Further, the 'contributions', forced or otherwise, made to the Viet Minh were in piastres—which could be converted into francs at a profit—that is to say, the French were indirectly financing their own enemies! The artificially high rate of exchange also militated against legitimate trade with Vietnam.



There were in fact a hundred reasons for the devaluation of the piastre.

But not one for the way in which it was done.<sup>1</sup> At a few hours' notice the governments of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were informed that henceforward the piastre would be valued at ten francs only. There was no consultation—M. Letourneau, the French Minister for the Associated States, was in Vietnam at the time, and even he did not know of the move. It was a blunder, surprisingly inept. Suppose U.S.A. made a sudden and unilateral announcement that henceforward it would regard the pound as being worth only two dollars!

The French move was far more clumsy than this. For years its local spokesmen had been patiently insisting to the local people that the independence granted was real indeed—and now Paris nullified all their persuasive arguments with an economic *coup d'état*. How could Vietnam claim to be an independent state if a foreign country, France, could dictate the value of her currency?

I found the Prime Minister legitimately angry—"What a gift to Viet Minh propagandists!" he groaned—and local French officials were furious. Nor were commercial circles happy—since the cost of imports from France would be increased by 70 per cent. Indignation meetings passed resolutions of protest against the 'inevitable rise in the cost of living', and demanded that the government should (a) ban the import of luxuries, (b) raise the cry of 'buy Vietnamese', (c) work out a policy of industrialization. At the moment this was little more than words—there are no Vietnamese industrial products to buy: but it could be a pointer to policies ahead. And, since a principal French objective is to retain its commercial advan-

<sup>1</sup> I did hear one mentioned, long afterwards—that if the question had been raised officially and in advance, many people would have got to know, and some would have used the knowledge to better their own fortunes. This is certainly true—in any country. Yet its cost would have been trivial in comparison with the loss of trust caused by the unilateral devaluation. And surely there *are* methods of controlling the activities of financial pirates.

Another argument, perhaps more forcible, was that it would have been impossible for the French to persuade *three* separate governments to take the responsibility of an unpopular step without long discussions or disputes—and in that time, with the devaluation already foreshadowed, the economy of the states would have suffered. It is true that the suggestion of devaluation would probably have been opposed—the *French* were the people who were suffering the harm, not the countries of Indo-China.

tages in Indo-China, it follows that the method of this blow has done a good deal of harm.

But I was much more concerned at political and moral effects on the Vietnamese. The friends of France squirmed in their discomfiture. The more extreme Nationalists saw in this outside interference confirmation of their worst fears—that independence was only a pretence, and that their country was still subordinate to France.

(I did advance one argument. Despite local complacency, the piastre *had* to be devalued—as soon as it entered the world market as a free currency it could not possibly maintain its arbitrary legal value. Since devaluation always arouses opposition, especially in commercial circles adversely affected, I argued that the French had really done the governments of Indo-China a very useful turn by shouldering the responsibility for an unpopular action!)

I am not sure how the harm can be undone. A frank explanation that it was impelled by France's own budgetary difficulties might help—but few people understand budgets. I believe that the moment is ripe for a clear statement or re-statement of the position. I have suggested that one of the dangers to Vietnam lies in the *attentistes*, the waverers who are waiting to see which side will win. These gentry command no admiration, but they are numerous enough to be important. It may be true that the Vietnam government has not done enough to rally them, but it is also true that French policy has too often encouraged their cautious attitude.

Just as important are the Nationalists who are still suspicious of French intentions—and, because of this, have not put their full weight into the struggle: this is a very dangerous attitude, but one not unknown in many countries. The devaluation fiasco of course confirmed all their fears, and the results could be near-disastrous at a moment when confidence and unity of purpose are essential.

The French politicians must act urgently and strongly. Those over seventy years of age should be instructed that the era of colonialism is past, and that there is no chance whatever of France returning to her position in Indo-China as of 1939, much less as of 1914. That being so, the future must be faced squarely: the time has long gone for grudging con-



cessions: liberty should be not meanly doled, but freely given. The treaties of 1949, with their subsequent development, were statesmanlike enough: their potentialities should now be recognized frankly and without apprehension. In particular, it should be stated categorically that if Vietnam ever wishes to leave the French Union, there is no power on earth which can keep her within it. This is not a new and startling formula, but a simple statement of fact, as the logical French must recognize.

The Emperor Bao Dai is reported as having said to President Auriol: "We want to be independent, but are willing to enter the French Union—so long as it is a Union, not a sort of club and not a nursery. . . . We want something like the British Commonwealth, where we can feel like Canada. . . . We want an army, and we want to command our army."

I heard the same argument a hundred times—usually with India substituted for Canada. It is true that the present treaties—voluntarily signed—place Vietnam within the French Union, and it would be no more than common sense to remain there—a new country always needs friends. Yet I have stressed that Vietnam could always leave the Union if she wished, just as Canada could leave the Commonwealth. And of course Vietnam wants an army under her own command: but she will have to pay for its support.

These facts are elementary, but they are surprisingly little understood in Vietnam. I urged the French that the time was ripe for a new announcement of policy—without diplomatic equivocation and in the simplest language, making the independence of Vietnam plain to the world—and especially to the Vietnamese. Since this involves but little more than a confirmation of existing promises the cost would be negligible, but the results could be far-reaching.

I noticed that one point was appreciated by some French politicians—though strangely overlooked by others. All are agreed that other democratic powers should be asked to share the terrible cost of the Viet Minh war, and this demand is reasonable enough. But financial aid in these days can only come in any quantity from one source—the United States.

U.S.A. has already contributed liberally to back the French

effort, and might conceivably do more. There is a French equivalent to the old adage about paying the piper and calling the tune. If the Americans get deeply involved financially, they will probably get more interested politically. Their outlook, once they saw the problem at close range, might not differ from the French on many points, but I think they would feel strongly on the one I have just raised—the necessity for a clear declaration of independence.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### HONOUR WHERE DUE

#### I

**I**T is high time that someone gave a word of praise to the French.

An absurd misconception has swept the world. Because the French were defeated in 1940, it seems to be assumed that they have suddenly lost all the qualities which made them great. This is madness. It is especially irritating as coming from the British, who were saved from the same onslaught by the English Channel, and from the Americans, who never had to face the German horde at the height of its triumphal power.

It is true that the French made many political mistakes in Indo-China, especially during the dominance of General de Gaulle. Since the prestige of France had been lowered by her defeat in Europe, it was held that it must be vigorously maintained elsewhere. Hence the French resentment at the course of events in Syria, for which the British are blamed by those who completely failed to realize how the war stresses had provoked and invigorated nationalism. Hence, too, their early efforts to return to something like the *status quo* in Indo-China.

But here events were already beyond control. With their customary realism, the French soon realized this, and concentrated their efforts on saving what they could from the wreck. Yet the treaties they made were honourable and liberal—and the French had to pay for making them valid.

That price has been heavy indeed. The strength of the French Expeditionary Force—its title is significant of its present status, indicating that it is in Vietnam by invitation, and not by colonial right—is 170,000 men. Of these, about 75,000, all volunteers, are Frenchmen. (The remainder are Foreign Legionnaires, Vietnamese, North Africans and Senegalese.) Of the French, 7,000 are officers and 25,000 non-commissioned officers—who not

only guide the French units but form the cadres of the colonial regiments—professional soldiers, and invaluable. These men have borne the highest casualties. Of the 32,565 dead in the French forces, half were metropolitan Frenchmen. 24 per cent of the total annual intake of officers, and 45 per cent of N.C.O.s, have perished in Indo-China.

The cost of the war to France up to the end of 1952 reached the staggering total of £1,600,000,000. The provisional estimate for 1953 is nearly £470,000,000. Although U.S.A. has agreed to contribute two-fifths of this, the balance represents 12 per cent of the total French budget.

Such expenditure ought to nullify the accusation of colonialism. Even if France were to milk Indo-China dry, she could not recover her war costs in a hundred years. It would have been much cheaper—in all but honour—to have cleared out of the country years ago.

There are those who, tired and pessimistic, now openly or covertly advocate this. There are those who, despite the warnings of similar endeavours elsewhere, favour an attempt to arrange a negotiated peace with Ho Chi Minh. Yet so far these factions are only minorities. Most French realize that their hand is to the plough: they will not relax their grip until this can be firmly grasped by the Vietnamese. They do not call for direct help from outside—American or British intervention would bring the Chinese into the war in overwhelming force—but they would like a little more outside understanding.

Another aspect of the Indo-China war is frequently overlooked—save in France. If the French Expeditionary Force, of well-equipped and experienced battle units, could be transferred to Europe, it would not only restore France's share of the balance of power and delight the commander of the Atlantic Pact forces: it might render unnecessary the re-armament of Germany. The Russians might care to note this: they are genuinely and legitimately concerned about a revival of German military power—here is one method of avoiding it.

## II

Yet the war is only the culmination of the French effort in Indo-China.



The French outlook on colonies has always differed completely from the British. We sought them primarily as markets for our increasing industry—some of them became colonies almost accidentally or casually after they had been developed as markets. The French, with their better balanced economy, had no such need. With them it was largely a matter of pride. There was a time when to be a great power you must have colonial possessions—the more numerous the higher the estimation of your power.

France was late in the Far Eastern scramble, and Indo-China was the only territory left. At first French interest here was negligible, but ardent nationalists like Napoleon III, aided by a few dramatic episodes, served to bring the region into closer and more sentimental relationship with France.

Even in colonial administration British and French ideas differed. From an early stage we adopted the outlook that all colonial peoples should be gradually prepared for self-government. We fostered local ideas, amending them only to admit the inculcation of more up-to-date methods. 'Indirect rule' was a favourite device, involving the minimum of interference. The French, on the other hand, believed that they were the heritors of a civilizing mission—this was no naïve delusion, but a genuine faith. They regarded their standard of culture as very high—which was true—and their duty as to offer its benefits to all their subjects. That is to say, their objective was not to make Africans into good Africans, but into good Frenchmen. It is easy to sneer at such an ambition now, but in its day it was far from absurd, and was often applied in most generous and paternal fashion.

Hence, while the French might not be classed as 'good colonists' in the sense of inculcating responsibility in backward peoples, in practical and beneficial achievements they were second to none. They could reasonably invite comparison between their colonies and any others in the world.

In Indo-China they found countries devastated by internecine strife, very backward in administration, and with social services scarcely existing. But for the Viet Minh war, Vietnam could now be handed over as a civilized land.

One of the most significant French successes has been in public health. This can be measured by the phenomenal rise in the

population—due not only to the prolific tendencies of the population, but to the vast improvement in their health conditions and in the lowering of mortality rates. In 1880 the total population of Indo-China was only ten millions. By 1921 this had become almost nineteen millions, by 1943 nearly twenty-seven millions and by 1951 more than twenty-eight millions.

In 1880 there existed no local medical services at all. The whole of the initial medical staff had to come from France. Now all large towns have hospitals, and most villages medical posts. As I showed earlier, most of these are staffed by trained local personnel.

Probably the greatest success—and certainly that most affecting the growth of the population—has been gained in the fight against the epidemics which once ravaged the region. Plague and cholera have been brought completely under control, and malaria—once the most widespread scourge—has been very greatly reduced. In the early stages the work was hindered by traditional local prejudices, but to-day the population is very co-operative. Until 1939 health services accounted for nearly 10 per cent of the budget. Present conditions should be compared with those prevailing as late as 1900, when 65 per cent of all babies died in their first year.

The advance of education, too, has been remarkable. Here—among the Vietnamese, at least—there was little resistance save in the more backward country districts, where children were put to work at an early age. Again the French had to start from the beginning. There were some small schools attached to pagodas, but the number of children receiving any instruction was very small. Those favoured were mostly of the mandarin families: the peasants were largely neglected. This meant that there was a class of intellectuals, but below them a mass of ignorance. An intellectual aristocracy *can* be as unsatisfactory as one of feudalism or wealth. The principal objective of Indo-Chinese education was to train men for official posts.

As with medicine, the first French efforts in education were made by the missionaries. Not until the French took over control of local administration was popular education introduced. Its initial growth was slow. In twenty years some nine hundred schools were established, with 30,000 pupils. However, the bulk of these were concentrated in Cochin China—a direct



French colony. In the protectorates the beginning was more hesitant: the first school established in Tonkin was open for months without enrolling a single student!

The early difficulty was the language. French teachers had to be brought over to give modern education: often they spoke no Annamese—and their pupils spoke no French. Soon it was realized that there could never be universal education save on a basis of native teachers, and suitable colleges were opened. It took time, also, to persuade local opinion that girls as much as boys need education.

French has always been maintained as a school subject, and its use for higher education is of course invaluable—with French, the learning of the world is at the service of any student. Nevertheless, the system has led to disappointments. The French hoped that a new type of native would emerge, possessing the best of both civilizations and cultures—the modern science of the West mingling harmoniously with the philosophy of the East. In practice the system tended to produce an indigested medley of Western facts and Eastern morals—a confusion of ideas which gave free play to Nationalist and Communist infiltration.

Nevertheless, popular education has made enormous strides. In 1915 there were only 65,000 scholars: by 1930 the figure had become 310,000, by 1940 538,000, and by 1944 there were 12,164 primary schools with 855,000 pupils, while a further 84,000 attended higher grade schools and colleges. In addition, 140,000 children are estimated to attend private schools—Catholic, Chinese, etc. In all about 50 per cent of children of school age are now receiving education. The proportions vary: in some towns it is as high as 75 per cent; in mountain hamlets very much smaller. A significant feature is to be found in the teaching staff: in 1944 there were only 660 French—nearly all in the higher schools—to 19,163 Indo-Chinese teachers.

(Because of the war and the division of the country, later figures are not available. But it can safely be said that in Cochin China—where government control is more substantial—the situation is now considerably better than that quoted.)

I saw many primary and secondary schools. There are also specialist establishments—not only training colleges for teachers and technical schools, but institutions for training dispensers

and nurses, social workers, child welfare specialists, and midwives. There are colleges for physical culture instructors—the subject is very popular in Vietnam. Other specialist organizations include an Oceanographic Institute, covering the study of marine geography and biology: a Rubber Research Institute, and a Rice Institute. This could prove the most important of all: it carries out practical experiments in selecting seeds, manures, and growing conditions: when it has succeeded in breaking through the traditional prejudices of the peasant, it should be very beneficial.

Two famous institutions have already accomplished remarkable achievements. I have referred to the *École Française d'Extrême Orient*, which since its foundation in 1898 has carried out a tremendous amount of cultural research. It must be galling to local Nationalists to realize that their knowledge of Indo-Chinese civilizations is largely derived from *French* endeavours. The School's activities are by no means limited to the excavation of ancient splendours like Angkor—long ignored by the local people: it has explored the ideas of the past, especially of the great days of the Indo-Chinese kingdoms. If ever a modern and distinct civilization arises in the region, it will owe much to the savants who revealed the glories of the old.

The second organization consists of four Pasteur Institutes. Here are the research centres for the study of tropical diseases, and for the discovery of their cure. Here are made the vaccines and serums used all over the country. Here are the originators of most of the health projects carried out in the peninsula, and here devolves much of the credit for the higher standards of health and longer expectation of life.

"If the French had done nothing more than to create the Pasteur Institutes, their incursion would have been worth while." True, it was a doctor who said this—but he was a Vietnamese.

### III

The French achievement only begins with health and education. These impel advances in the economic field.

The economy of Indo-China is still overwhelmingly agricultural. This suited the French, who could supply any manufac-



tured goods it needed, and it suited the ideas of the local people, not attracted by the mechanical work of factories. But the continuous increase in population produces a serious pressure on the land available for cultivation: and, as the area of this increased, on communications.

When the French took over the country, there were no roads worthy of the name. Dried earth tracks halted at the numerous rivers, and further progress depended on fords and primitive ferries.

By 1939 (I have emphasized that it is impossible and useless to quote more modern figures—which are moreover not available in a divided country) there were 12,500 miles of asphalt roads, well engineered, and another 7,500 miles of country roads passable in good weather. The most famous road is ancient, but has been entirely reconstructed—the Mandarin Road, which links China with Siam, and is 1,600 miles long—the distance from Paris to Moscow.

As I have pointed out, there are still a large number of ferries in the delta areas, where the main river breaks up into many courses, some very wide. Bridges have been built at all possible points along the main roads, and the fact that the existing ferries are overcrowded is largely due to the exigencies of war.

The railway system covers 1,900 miles, but to-day it is cut into short stretches by the different military occupations. The total distance may appear short, but in some regions a railway is unnecessary because communications by water are so easy.

The Mekong delta is remarkable. Ships drawing sixteen feet can sail as far as Phnom Penh, more than two hundred miles inland. In Cochin China there are 1,250 miles of navigable waterways—and hundreds more are available for small boats. The Red River delta is not quite so benevolent, but with its tributaries it offers 400 miles to ships drawing eighteen feet. It needs firm control, however, for in the rainy season it can rise rapidly by as much as thirty-seven feet.

Such drastic aberrations were, of course, a serious handicap to cultivation: not only harvests but whole villages were swept away by the swirling waters. The old government of Annam had endeavoured to protect the ricefields by building dams, but the continual deposit of alluvial soil raised the bed of the rivers, and so made these inadequate.



S.M. Bao Dai, Emperor of Vietnam



S.E. Nguyen van Tam, Prime Minister



S.M. Norodom Sihanouk,  
King of Cambodia



S.M. Sisavang Vong,  
King of Laos



General Nguyen van Hinh



Ho Chi Minh





Older people learn to read



Near Hué

The French approached the problem by European methods—and by wide-scale instead of local organization. They rebuilt the dams strongly enough to withstand the greatest flood—the work involved equalling the excavation of the Suez Canal. As a result the northern delta had by 1939 reached a degree of prosperity far beyond anything in its history.

Yet it was in Cochin China that the French achieved their greatest success—in the Red River delta nearly all the land suitable for rice culture was already in use, and the problem was one of conservation: but in the south vast areas were swamps, liable to become inland seas at the whim of the Mekong. In 1865 there were only 620,000 acres under rice cultivation: now, as a result of drainage and irrigation, there are nearly 6,000,000—and production has increased from 300,000 tons to 3,000,000 tons a year.

In all Indo-China, 12,000,000 acres of tillable land have been added—a practical achievement of which anybody might be proud. Without this, the increase of population might have been a curse rather than a boon. Even to-day there is overcrowding—partly due to effects of the war, which creates streams of refugees, but especially to the local prejudice in favour of rice swamps. There is plenty of land available for peasants who will go inland and upland, but the task of persuading them to go is protracted.

The French improvements made Indo-China the second largest of the rice exporters—nearly two million tons out of a total production of seven millions. (Local needs average from two hundred to two hundred and fifty kilogrammes a year per person—about a pound a day.) The ravages of war have seriously reduced these figures: the raids, and the feeling of insecurity, have cut down production by nearly one-half.

The French have worked hard to introduce subsidiary crops, and to persuade the peasants to grow them. Of these maize has been the most popular. By 1939 its production had reached 650,000 tons, but in 1951 that of the Vietnam areas was only 60,000 tons. Great success has, however, been obtained with rubber. Introduced in 1875 into plantations wrested from the forest, it made rapid progress after the first World War, so that production reached 60,000 tons a year. Tea production expanded in thirty years from 200 tons to 17,000 tons—practically all con-



sumed locally. Coffee also satisfies local needs. In recent years pepper has been an important crop, with an annual production of 5,000 tons. There are useful crops of sugar cane, tobacco, copra, cotton and lacquer—this obtained from incisions into the arbuste tree.

The wealth of the forests is still almost untapped. Of the total area of Indo-China—740,000 square kilometres, no less than 424,000 are covered by forests. Their distribution is, however, irregular—Laos has 204,000 square kilometres, Cochin China only 8,000. The timbers vary from light to very heavy.

The climate of Indo-China is scarcely suitable for cattle-raising, and the population prefer fish to meat: but, since the French made huge areas available for farming, this side of agriculture has expanded considerably—with the aid of new veterinary and advisory services. Recent figures show animal populations of:

2,025,000	cattle
1,530,000	buffaloes
5,000,000	pigs
90,000	horses
75,000	goats
11,200	sheep
2,000	domestic elephants.

Indo-China is not so rich as its neighbours in industrial resources—there is no oil, as in Indonesia, and practically no tin, a great part of the wealth of Malaya. The geological survey of the country is by no means complete, but already useful quantities of minerals are being exploited. These include an annual output of 2,600,000 tons of coal, of which 1,800,000 tons were exported. Other figures (1939) were: zinc 50,000 tons, iron 80,000 tons, tin 1,600 tons, tungsten 450 tons, manganese 1,700 tons, salt 190,000 tons, phosphates 100,000 tons, and small quantities of gold, silver, antimony, bauxite, jade and some precious stones. Save for its comparative inaccessibility, there is enough stone in the mountains to pave the roads of all Asia.

In view of the limited resources, apart from agriculture, it is not surprising to find that industry is still in an early state of

development. There are rice distilleries, and factories for the manufacture of sugar, soap, silk and cotton goods, tobacco, rubber, cement and some chemicals. There are the inevitable local utilities in the towns, and some artisan industries on traditional lines, but in all only about 100,000 people are industrial workers—though about a million are whole or part-time artisans—and of these 40,000 are in the mines. Incidentally, save for coal, most of the mines are in Viet Minh hands, and their products go to China to pay for munitions of war.

The French recognize that industry in Indo-China is only in its elementary stages. Even before the war there were plans for its development. They recognized that agriculture would remain the predominant occupation, but an expanded industry would relieve the pressure of population and would help to balance the region's economy. A complete balance amounting to self-sufficiency is impossible.

Further plans for irrigation propose to add large areas for rice production—1,500,000 acres in Tonkin, 450,000 in Annam, and 4,700,000 in Cochin China. As an auxiliary, factories for the manufacture of fertilizers would be extended.

There are several big schemes for hydro-electrical works, the current being carried from the mountain regions to the towns. The supply of cheap electricity would, of course, facilitate the maintenance of factories. Extension of chemical industries was planned, while rayon and iron and steel products would also be important. It is anticipated that intensive geological research will reveal new mineral resources.

For a country which has come under Western influence so recently, the economic progress has been remarkable. Again it should be emphasized that the French are largely responsible. In the early and vital stages it was very difficult to arouse any local interest, and it was only much later that local technicians—trained by the French—began to play a worthy part in the development of their resources.

#### IV

One beneficent feature of the French rule is in some danger to-day. Throughout history the states of Indo-China invited



aggression because they were weak and divided. The French brought them together, and administered them along similar lines. Although the peoples differed, economically their countries were to some degree complementary, and they prospered on their interdependence.

The French hope to preserve this degree of unity. In giving independence to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the French created a United States of Indo-China, to which all three belong. Through the French Union their foreign policy should be co-ordinated, while they themselves were to maintain their economic co-operation—the piastre remains the common currency, for example.

This is only reasonable—but reason is not always a feature of Nationalism. There are 'patriots' who want to make their countries completely independent, politically and economically, and are prepared to ruin them in the attempt. Already there are suggestions that the Indo-China federation is not too firmly based. Most of the complaints have so far come from the weak countries, Laos and Cambodia, some of whose leaders seem to think that they will gain their freedom from France only to lose it to the powerful new Vietnam.

It is difficult to see how the French can do more than to try to persuade the peoples to reason. Force is neither desirable nor possible. If one of the three countries wishes to withdraw from the association, no one can stop it. Yet such a course would be the height of folly, and leaders who ordered it would be revealed as incompetent clowns.

Similarly, nothing can force the three states to maintain the loose connection with France envisaged by the treaties. Again this is merely a question of common sense. Politically, all three are likely to require the support of a powerful friend. Economically—and in the long run a government is apt to be judged by its economic success—fervent Nationalists would do well to envisage their country before the French came, and its present condition but for French aid and skill.

As I write, the King of Cambodia is endeavouring to persuade Thailand to raise in the United Nations the question of independence in Indo-China. If this were raised, it will almost certainly be dismissed as one internal to the French Union. Yet the French could gladly invite a United Nations mission to

examine their achievement in South-East Asia, and to compare it with that of other U.N. members who have undertaken the tutelage of backward states. The French have no reason to fear the comparison. King Norodom himself might profitably read contemporary accounts of the miseries of his own country under his incompetent ancestors less than a hundred years ago, and compare them with present standards and future possibilities.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

### TO-MORROW IN VIETNAM

#### I

VIETNAM is an old nation, but a new state, with all the attractiveness of youth and some of its failings. The veneer of Westernization which the French have spread can be misleading: its effects in technical matters are obvious and permanent, but fundamentally the Vietnamese are still Orientals.

Democracy has so far had no opportunity to function. Under the French colonial régime it could be applied only in local affairs—where it had long flourished in its own fashion. Since Vietnam achieved its independence the Viet Minh war has effectively blocked democratic progress. Local elections have been held in the provinces under government control, but national elections are impossible in a country torn into two by war.

I found that the political situation was interesting. One must forget European organizations, and think of Eastern methods. French political parties which endeavoured to spread their ideals and ideologies to Vietnam have failed dismally. Four years ago, for example, a Vietnamese Socialist Party was founded, and sought to organize itself by Western methods. It has so far achieved a membership—in a population of 24,000,000—of just over a thousand!

The political scene reveals also that the differences between northern and southern Vietnam are wider than some of the Nationalists care to pretend. In the south there are no political parties at all: there are religious groupings, like the Catholics and the Cao Daists, but most people attach themselves to personalities—an old tradition.

In the north there do exist organizations which call themselves parties, but which could be more accurately described as communities with similar interests. There is an association of those

who resisted the Japanese: another of those who collaborated with the Chinese Nationalists—its members were then included within the Viet Minh. Other groups get together for a particular purpose—to propose or resist this or that measure: these organizations are usually ephemeral, dissolving as abruptly as they form. In some of the northern towns I heard of the League of Democratic action, but it proved to be no more than a framework for minor and local groups, with no discernible political programme of its own. People generally seemed to prefer local coalitions of similar interests: a 'political party' will prove to consist of men from the same birthplace, or of the same profession, or with the same commercial interests.

In the villages the situation is even simpler. There, political slogans are meaningless: the elections are based on personalities. This otherwise admirable system has one drawback: it takes a long time to become a personality, and the average age of village councillors is too high.

All men over twenty-one have the right to vote in both local and national elections. So far the franchise has been denied to women, but I had a long talk with the eldest daughter of the Prime Minister—a very charming and intelligent woman. She might be called the leader of the Vietnamese feminist movement: she is no militant extremist, but her mind is as subtle as that of any male politician. Local tradition has for centuries emphasized that woman's place is in the home and in the fields, but gently yet persistently she and her friends are attacking this outlook. Already there are women in all the learned professions in Vietnam: politics can scarcely be rated so highly, and it is absurd to imagine that women will long be excluded from its mysteries.

There was only one feature common to all the politicians I met: Nationalism. With varying degrees of fervour, all of them proclaim this. Some seemed to vie with each other in anti-French tirades. One man in authority gave me a special ten-minute oration on French 'crimes'.

"But what would you do if the French took you at your word and walked out of Vietnam?" I asked.

He looked scared at the idea, and I understood that he had merely been expounding electioneering platitudes.

Yet common sense can penetrate even politics. Some of the



present-day cabinet ministers were actually fighting against the French five years ago.

## II

In my round of government departments I went first to see Tran Dinh Hoc, the Minister of Agriculture, and his Director-General (or Permanent Secretary). I was glad to find them as competent a pair of administrators as I was to meet in all Vietnam: for, despite optimistic talk about industrialization, for very many years to come the prosperity of Vietnam is likely to rest upon its agriculture.

I had gone to ask questions, but found myself answering them. The two men were about to leave on an exploratory tour of Europe, and their queries eventually got out of my depth. But I was able to give them some ideas on Danish farming which prompted further investigation.

Then we returned to home problems. These men at any rate realized that the peasant village was the life cell of the new Vietnam. They appreciated both the advantages and disabilities of its traditional practices, customary rights, and communal outlook. Although the cultivation period is comparatively short, no crop needs such intense and scrupulous care as rice, which must always be the staple product of Vietnam.

The agricultural problem varies in different parts of the country. The Red River delta in Tonkin is essentially a region of peasant-proprietors, with very small holdings. The pressure of population is heavy—1,170 to the square mile for the whole delta, 2,080 to the square mile in the districts of most intensive cultivation. The area which can be added by irrigation to the present ricefields is comparatively small, and some emigration from the region is inevitable—despite the fertility of the soil and the intensity of cultivation, the delta cannot produce enough rice to support its own population, and has to 'borrow' 200,000 tons a years from the south. Local conditions can be improved by a process of co-massation. After generations of splitting-up of farms between sons, some peasants now have only one or two acres divided into three or four separate fields, involving a great wastage of labour. A programme of unification has been worked

out, but like many things in Vietnam must await the end of the war.

In Annam and Cochin China the government faces the usual problem of peasant states—the landlord, and the traditional craving of the peasant to possess his own land. Most of them do, but in the two provinces 23 per cent of the cultivable area is owned by landlords, who let it out to peasants, usually on a share-cropping basis. I have suggested that this is seldom satisfactory, and sometimes iniquitous. It is also a gift to Viet Minh propagandists. To the tied peasant, the call of freedom means not a revolt against the French, but independence of the landlord.

The present plan for reform is partial and hesitant. It is based on voluntary action. The landlords are being 'encouraged' by the government to sell land to the sitting tenants. If the landlord agrees, the government steps in with financial help—the landlord gets his money, and the peasant can spread his payments over ten or more years. This elementary scheme has worked well—in those cases where the landlord has been willing to sell. I could appreciate the government's difficulties, for the landlords are well represented in influential quarters: nevertheless more decisive action would pay handsome dividends—in the long run, even to the landlords.

It is true that agricultural reform of this kind would not necessarily add one ear of rice to the annual production, but to the peasants concerned it is a matter of overwhelming importance. Effective action could have striking results in the agricultural regions.

Viet Minh, of course, are unhampered by restrictions. Estates of 'reactionaries' are confiscated, and let out in plots to the peasants—usually those who had worked on the estates—so long as they are politically 'sound'. But they are under firm control as to the production of crops and the disposal of produce—both anathema to the peasant, who wants high prices when they are available, and government assistance when they are not: and, of course, no taxation. He always was a difficult person to govern.

If the government occupy a Viet Minh area, no attempt is made to restore the land to the dispossessed landlords—though they may be given compensation. Further, as another modest



move, the maximum portion of the landlord from share-cropping agreements has been fixed at one-third, and out of this he must pay all dues and taxes. Even so, his return is generous compared with that of the peasants who work his land.

The long-term problem is a familiar one—more production. With the population increasing annually, home consumption rises: yet at the same time Vietnam's rice exports provide the bulk of her foreign currency. Yet the area over which the ricefields can be expanded is limited by Nature.

One of the partial solutions attempted by the French was the encouragement of subsidiary crops. These would provide more vegetables and corn locally, and so release rice for export. The difficulty has lain in local prejudices. The people have always preferred rice to maize: so, apparently they always will. They have always preferred to work in the rice swamps: hence they have resisted attempts to re-settle them on higher ground.

Nevertheless, the process has begun. Thousands of Vietnamese peasants have now settled around Dalat as market gardeners and are doing very well. Tens of thousands of families will eventually have to be transferred to the upland valleys, where there is plenty of land for the asking. The government's first task is one of persuasive propaganda.

The Vietnamese government has taken over the schemes of irrigation and land reclamation envisaged by the French, and the local effects will eventually be good. Farming co-operatives have been established: most peasants regard them with suspicion—as they do almost anything which was not practised by their great-grandfathers. The government has set up Farming Credit Banks, which grant loans at low rates, but thousands of peasants still put themselves in the hands of usurers who consider 150 per cent or even 200 per cent a modest rate of interest. Peasant margins are always small, and a mishap or natural setback means that unfortunate men have to seek immediate assistance: the government scheme is very much cheaper, but the village money-lender is quicker. However, 'pilot villages' have been selected for experimental purposes, and in the long run the system will be a boon.

So will the co-operative marketing schemes, when they come into operation. "There are too many middle-men in the food

business here," said a Vietnamese merchant. "And many of them are Chinese. You have noticed the high cost of living? It is serious, and could have most important effects. There is only one way to lower prices—to cut out the middle-men."

"One other thing should be added to it," said his friend. "Cut out also the bribes a merchant has to pay to get his merchandise transported from the fields to the towns."

I agreed with them about the danger of the high cost of living. People will wax sentimental about patriotism, but their outlook on a particular government is usually determined by economic matters. Certainly some people in Vietnam are profiting far too freely from the emergency. Even allowing for the difficulties of transport during a civil war, 6s. 8d. is too much for a restaurant-helping of potatoes.

### III

Pressure of population impels consideration of industrialization, a problem I have already mentioned. The Vietnam government has created a Ministry of Planning to 'change over from a colonial economy to a national economy'. This does not imply self-sufficiency, which owing to the comparatively narrow range of local resources is manifestly impossible. But it does suggest that these resources should be developed locally, and not exported in the form of raw materials.

The supply of coal can be greatly extended; it is beyond the country's needs, and provides a valuable export. The new hydro-electric schemes, when completed, should encourage industrial development—if they do not become war victims.

The Vietnamese can be a capable worker, and becomes a good mechanic apparently by instinct. It takes some time to accustom him to the discipline of a factory and a moving band, but few will think the worse of him for that.

One of the early needs of Vietnam—always with the proviso 'when the war is over'—is capital investment. There is not much local capital available. The government has invited investments from 'international organizations, the Associated States of the French Union or other friendly powers', but much will depend upon the conditions under which Vietnam uses her



independence 'when the war is over'. If the French are unfairly treated, there will be no rush of capitalist investment from other countries. On the other hand, if the two countries remain loyal partners France herself could provide or guarantee most of the capital required.

A partial industrialization is possible and essential. The first objective of the government should be to raise the general standard of living. It would pay handsome dividends if the Vietnamese denied themselves luxuries to finance as many as possible of their own enterprises—even the proceeds of the Cholon gambling houses might be diverted to better causes. For a poor country is not really free: a healthy, fair and prosperous economy is the best prophylactic against political diseases.

The government has prepared for continuing industrialization by social legislation: this is still immature, but it is always important to begin.

The pressure of population could affect relations between the Associated States of Indo-China. I have mentioned that the Vietnamese have 'invaded' Cambodia in some force. They are not very popular, but when a country teems with opportunities which its own people do not accept, other people come in to exploit them. Among a land-hungry people like the Vietnamese, the peasants gaze longingly at the part-occupied plains of Cambodia and Laos.

They themselves have the same problem in reverse. The Chinese, by their energy and ability, have secured an economic position out of all proportion to their numbers. Even these are large. There are about 500,000 at Cholon, 80,000 in Saigon, 50,000 at Haiphong, and another 100,000 scattered about the country—mostly in the other commercial centres. It is estimated that about two-thirds are Nationalists, the rest Communists. But most Chinese, in the old Oriental fashion, try to maintain a foot in both camps.

One of their privileges will certainly come up for later discussion. When the French had to bribe Chiang Kai-shek to withdraw his troops from North Vietnam, they offered the privilege of mixed courts, similar to those which they themselves enjoy. (To Chiang this was probably a recompense for the 'loss of face' involved in the older European Consular

Courts in China.) Hence if a Frenchman or a Chinese is involved in legal argument with a Vietnamese, the case is tried before a mixed court in which at least one of his own nationals is a judge: but an Englishman or an American must appear before a Vietnamese court.

## IV

For that matter, the French too will have to look seriously at the mixed courts, which are frowned on by Vietnamese intellectual opinion. The Minister of Justice—a proclaimed friend of France—urged vehemently to me that they had much influence on the *attentiste*. How could Vietnamese believe that their independence was real when the French claimed such a position of privilege?

I had noticed that one or two unfortunate decisions of the mixed courts were being freely discussed: and it is true that opinion is often founded on comparatively trivial matters. The Minister of Justice criticized his predecessor for accepting the idea of the mixed courts, and made no secret of his wish to abolish them.

Few of the critics even attempted to be fair to the French. The mixed tribunals result from unhappy events during the days of Viet Minh ascendancy. Then Frenchmen were arrested on the most frivolous charges: they had 'insulted the state' by not raising their hats to its flag—a thing which no Vietnamese did. One man told me that his explanation that he never wore a hat was rejected. With their nationals imprisoned on fantastic grounds, the French sought to protect themselves.

"But the mixed courts are only a temporary measure," said a French high officer. "They will go when things become normal."

But will things ever become normal? Is it possible, in any land? Anyway, Vietnam is not Viet Minh. An abandonment of the mixed tribunals would have far-reaching effects. Even a formal announcement that they will be abandoned would be better than nothing.

Otherwise the organization of justice is fairly conventional. There are local justices of the peace, district courts in the larger towns, and appeal courts in the three capitals of Hanoi, Hué



and Saigon. There is not so clear a distinction between civil and criminal cases as in Europe—often the same magistrate tries both.

Vietnam is well supplied with lawyers, and there is plenty of work for them to do. In Cochin China, as a French colony, the Code Napoleon was the basis of the law, but in Annam and Tonkin local usages applied. Now, as a beginning, the more important clauses of the Code Napoleon have been adopted, in some cases amended, but local sentiment and traditions still have their influence. A murder may be dealt with on European lines, but other cases depend upon Vietnamese custom—often itself derived from the Chinese.

"And it's fairly sound," said a lawyer. "Take a case of marital infidelity. If a man seduces a married woman, he is punished: if it happens twice, *she* is punished: but if it happens three times the *husband* is punished, since it is held that he must have been compliant or negligent."

"Yes, and your modern laws aren't as effective as some of the old ones," an aged Notable commented. "In the old days an unfaithful wife was thrown to the elephants, to be trampled to death. Now she is merely fined, or even just spoken to! And you have lots more unfaithful wives than you used to have!"

He formed a minority of one in his suggestion of moving backwards: most Vietnamese gaze forward earnestly—their problem, indeed, is to translate their dreams into action, and to relate them to the sombre realities of the present.

v

I noticed that in most of the government departments the entire staff was Vietnamese. In others one or two French technicians had been retained—including one erudite financier who actually understood the budget—and in the offices concerned with the prosecution of the war there was usually a French observer. This was a reasonable precaution. French as well as Vietnamese lives are involved in the decisions and efficiency of defence departments, so it is natural that they should claim a watching brief 'until the war is over'.

One figure will however disprove the Communist propaganda contention that the French still rule Vietnam indirectly through their civil servants. In 1939 the middle and higher ranks of the government service included over 1,000 Vietnamese and 450 Frenchmen. (Of these, only about 300 were at their desks at a given moment—leave and sickness accounted for the rest.) To-day there are only 15 French civil servants in the Vietnamese departments. I saw most of them—all came within the two categories I have mentioned.

The organization of the civil service follows European lines. There are three grades: administrative, recruited from the universities; clerical, from the secondary schools; and minor. Salaries are based on the 'vital minimum pay', of 750 piastres a month. This can be augmented according to the cost of living and the grade. At the moment the lowest grade gets 120 per cent, the administrative class 1,200 per cent.

These salaries are not high by European standards, but are good for South-East Asia. This is important. Usually the basic cause of corruption is under-payment of officials, but here a messenger, even allowing for high prices, can live in simple style on 120 per cent of 750 piastres a month; many of the exaggerated costs do not affect him—he does not stay at hotels or demand steak and chips: he prefers rice, which is reasonably priced: and the administrative officer has no need at all to accept bribes when his salary is 9,000 piastres a month—nearly £100, even at the devalued rate of exchange. The fact that he sometimes does tends to indicate that the cause is not economic, but conformity to long-established and accepted practices.

I have mentioned corruption more than once: unchecked, it could ruin the country morally as well as economically. I do not wish to infer that *all* officials take bribes. And I record with pleasure that the Prime Minister and most of his colleagues have set their faces very sternly against such practices. The Minister of Justice told me that he was ready to apply severe discipline 'when the war ends'. But why wait? Severe discipline applied now could help to end the war.

The spirit of service is not inherent in an Eastern state—communal feeling is usually limited to a smaller unit like a



village. It will have to be fostered very carefully—the progress of Vietnam may depend upon it. I got the impression that the young people were ready to respond to a crusade preached with fervour and sincerity.

Yet economics are often involved in the ethics of communal service. One Vietnamese friend bemoaned the fact that so few of his fellow-countrymen who were doctors had joined the public service, but preferred private practice. This was certainly deplorable in a peasant state, where medical services must be well organized and cheap. Then I found that salaries paid to doctors in hospitals or public health services were very much smaller than the earnings of private practitioners. There are limits to the disinterestedness of the ordinary man—and in the Far East they are soon reached.

Another of my acquaintances was Nguyen Thanh Giung, the Minister for Education, an enthusiast for his task. He frankly admitted his debt to the French: he had taken over the system they had established, and was now developing it. The primary schools were already a hundred per cent Vietnamese-staffed, but for some time French teachers of languages would be needed in the secondary schools: and for advanced subjects in the universities.

Universal and compulsory education was his aim. Whenever an area is wrested from Viet Minh control, he sends a special team to get schools started: fortunately, buildings in the villages are simply and rapidly erected.

"The best thing is this—the children *want* to come to school," he beamed. "If there is not room for them, they crowd around the windows to listen."

He spoke of his schemes for adult education—and he has *not* waited 'until the war ends'. I had seen elderly market women in Hanoi using the lengthy (and hot) lunch period by learning to read and write, with young girls as their volunteer teachers. In the village halls of assembly, too, I had seen adult evening classes—and the local gods perched on their altars in the centre of the room surely looked on benignly.

One other trifling point emerged from our conversation, and I followed it up later, for it does indicate the crazy character of this guerrilla civil war. In districts along the edge of the northern delta, it is quite common for children to come in to

government schools to learn, and then go back to their homes in the Viet Minh areas!

## VI

The Prime Minister at least is under no delusions. Most Vietnamese adopt the Oriental habit of ignoring a problem instead of seeking a solution, and too many people in high places are prepared to blame all difficulties on the war—which is not always responsible for everything. Now Nguyen van Tam may have been a poet, but I found him a realist. His confidence in the issue of the war is not assumed, but unlike some of his colleagues he knows that this will not be the end of all his troubles, and that many new ones will present themselves.

The biggest ones may be economic. The new Vietnam will face enormous financial problems. The cost of living is already extremely high, and any further increase could lead to serious trouble. The unsatisfactory position is usually blamed on the war, but I have suggested that it is worse than it should be: a curtailment of luxury trades could have beneficial moral as well as economic effects.

Nguyen van Tam differs from some of his friends, too, in that he realizes that Vietnam must stand by its own endeavours. He envisages a friendly association with France—and even hopes for some United Nations assistance to repair the devastation of war—but he does not want his country to be an economic dependency any more than a colonial territory. This outlook is going to involve more changes than many Vietnamese realize, for some of those who have shouted the loudest against French influence have been content to accept too much French aid.

I told the Prime Minister a story of my native village. Some years ago a local politician began to raise a demand for piped water to replace the old pumps. Though some people were not quite sure what piped water was, the slogans sounded good—it is always sound policy to keep asking for something, then you yourself are less likely to be asked—and the campaign developed. It was successful, and piped water was promised. But as the engineering works began, some local economic genius discovered that the piped water would have to be paid for. "What's wrong with our pumps?" was the immediate reaction.



Outlook is often careless and sometimes dangerous when the other fellow has to pay the bills. Financial independence will carry with it many very nasty shocks to the Vietnamese, but once survived their effects should be salutary.

At the moment it was natural to find that the question of the army loomed large in the Prime Minister's mind. He wanted a Vietnamese army, allied to friends, and strong enough to defend the country. He was tremendously interested in agricultural development, and I think was prepared for bolder reforms than some of his colleagues, and thoroughly appreciated the necessity for local industrialization.

Yet his outlook was not entirely materialistic—the poet overcame the politician more than once. "The shocking devastation of this war!" he exclaimed, in real distress. "We can rebuild utilitarian bridges, but how can we replace the beautiful pagodas and other historic buildings which have been lost?"

He is an educated man by Western standards, but he is also an Oriental intellectual. The effects of geography and tradition are too often minimized or even ignored in Europe. It is easy to spread a veneer of Westernization, but to work it in deeply is a different problem. The Indo-Chinese accept gladly the wonders of Western science—but not the theory that the world is ruled by reason—'absorbed by geometry, where everything seems to be the proof of theorism'. The West looks on the world as an orderly or coherent concept: if in places it is not, it ought to be: civilization is synonymous with organization and order.

The Eastern cultural tradition is quite different. "To us, the world changes as a roll of shot silk displaying its many hues," explained a Vietnamese savant. "We do not try to reduce it to our own level, to shape it to our own likeness. Instead, we go towards the world, trying to forget our human limitations and frailties, to be able to take part in the gigantic rhythms of the universe. To be in tune with the world—that is our cultural ambition. In the West men yearn for power: here our quest is serenity.

"We are called impassible, apathetic. These things are but the reflection of our conscience striving towards wisdom, and realizing its own ignorance. True, they are intolerable to the Western mind, with its appreciation of intelligence, order and

organization. But we think with our hearts, not with our heads.

"Feeling rather than reason—it may appear foolish by your philosophy, but not by ours. And feelings do not easily submit to order. They prompt one to think not merely for profit, but for the pleasure of thinking. The Chinese invented gunpowder, but they did not adapt it to guns—but to fireworks. Yet for centuries they were happier with their fireworks than you were with your guns."

All this is true, or was true recently. It explains many 'failings' in Eastern society, as viewed from the West. Since wisdom has counted for more than action, control has been concentrated in the few: there has been no concept of the mass, or the significance of collective values—for wisdom is individual, not collective. In the Orient it is often associated with experience: the wise man is often he who can compare the present with the past. This can and does lead to the neglect of the urgency of the present.

This search for wisdom has had economic effects. If a man is wise, poverty means nothing to him. He refuses to have his ideas disturbed by fundamental issues: he finds it easier to accept things than to change them. Hence the old Vietnam state was based on its traditional culture: economically, socially and politically it was a passive and static society, unconcerned with the advances of the outer world.

Then came contacts with the West, and with them a conflict of ideas. This clash is less than a hundred years old—a trifle compared with the age of inherent ideas. *Things* can be accepted and rapidly assimilated, but ideas need prolonged digestion. Some of the results are only just beginning to show.

First, perhaps, in importance is the dawning realization that poverty is not inevitable. Now that this view has been widely spread, it gains ground among the masses—often imperfectly understood, and in primitive fashion. While some Vietnamese have the traditional distrust of all governments, others now display a childlike faith in the power of those in authority to effect endless improvements—apparently without any co-operation from the masses themselves. This outlook, of course, is not unknown in countries which claim to be politically mature.



A second point of discovery is that Western science can be used against the West. For long the European could hold the Far East in fee, but the knowledge that a Japanese bullet could kill a Russian had revolutionary effects on Asiatic minds. This alone would have been enough to spell the doom of the era of colonialism. It was reinforced by the precepts of President Wilson, and, later and more emphatically, by Mr. Gandhi. The fact that they were only superficially comprehended scarcely detracted from their force.

So, now, the goal of material welfare is replacing that of mental contentment. Whether it will lead to a greater measure of real happiness is perhaps debatable, but it has gone too far to be halted. "In the West men yearn for power, here our quest is serenity," said the Vietnamese savant. This was true yesterday, but is not true to-day. The idea of economic progress has been borrowed from the West, adapted to meet local conditions, and is now a feature of Vietnamese life—you must go into Laos and Cambodia to see the older culture still dominant.

To-day intelligent men talk of 'planning', as we do in the West—there is even a Ministry of Planning. The addition of a scientific side to the university was a revolution in itself: and the keenness of the youthful students emphasizes its importance.

With these things has come what someone described as 'the discovery of the masses'. The day of the learned mandarin as ruler has gone—the French administration sapped his power. His successors are as yet insecure and sometimes inept, but at least their outlook differs. The mandarin used to say: "Is this measure wise?" The modern administrator says: "Will the people accept this measure?" It may not be as wise as that of the mandarin, but public acceptance is rapidly becoming a condition of legislation. Learning, once a mandarin monopoly, is now available to the masses: it is still elementary, and mobs are too often swayed by pressure methods of modern propaganda: but time could make it a potent force.

The next step will be for the masses to realize their latent power. Hitherto this has always been lacking. Even now there is little real sense of what the West calls democracy. But ideas are stirring.

Especially among the young. Too many of them are still cynical or apathetic, but they are no longer neglected or sup-

pressed. There is even a Minister for Sport and Youth—in this country where men worship their ancestors!

I found talk about democracy very loose and airy. Nor were all the culprits Vietnamese. An American friend could not understand these people. They now had the vote—they had democracy. But instead of forming respectable parties like Republicans or Democrats, or even Conservatives and Socialists, they clustered into all kinds of little groups which never seemed to get anywhere. How could they hope to make democracy work like that?

The fact is, of course, that democracy, while the most satisfying political system, is the most difficult. It demands restraints and common endeavours not always encountered in states which have adopted some new ideas and are rushing them forward in incomplete comprehension. Democracy thrives on traditions—and local traditions in Vietnam are *not* democratic.

I would not care to forecast the fate of the present well-meaning government—which, with all its failures, is the best Vietnam ever had. Those who lead a revolution are seldom those who survive in power to direct its aftermath—and the present phase in Vietnam is revolutionary.

When a country has no democratic traditions, but when it is seized by the urge for material improvement—or, shall we say, with discontent with existing conditions—the course of events has become almost a routine. People become tired of the hesitant efforts of men who try to be democrats: they listen instead to men who proclaim that they can get things done quickly. This is already happening on the left: it could also happen on the right.

I met one or two politicians who quite obviously had ideas about dictatorship, but who possessed neither the personality nor the ability to put them into practice. I looked around the rising generation. Certainly there were stronger candidates there. All proclaimed democratic ideas—but some were very impatient—the first foundation of dictatorship. In view of the official and popular insistence on the building up of an army, which is now drawing a large share of the best young men into its ranks, I wondered if a new leader would emerge from among them. I saw no trace of a potential Hitler in Vietnam, and only a proportion of the Viet Minh would prefer a Stalin, but there might be



no great opposition to a Neguib. His success would depend upon his success. In spite of all modern progress, one traditional idea survives strongly—the advisability of being on the winning side. Ho Chi Minh knows this very well.

There is no talk of 'serenity' in his camp. He exploits unsatisfactory conditions in familiar fashion—and with little respect for truth or possibility. But in dealing with men he appreciates one factor—the inner need for a controlling faith. We have noted the comparative weakness of religion in Vietnam—especially communally, since tenets can be altered by individuals at their whim. Thus it is not too difficult to replace it by a creed which is materialistic rather than ethical.

The Vietnamese government should note this. Some of the Viet Minh prisoners I talked to *had* this faith—and held it more fervently than most ideas I encountered in Vietnam. It is not too early—indeed, it is already late—to present to the Vietnamese a programme which could arouse mass enthusiasm, and to proclaim it again and again with assurance and sincerity. As an earnest, it should be put into effect immediately to the very limit of its possibility.

All this is not impossible. Some countries are the natural slum areas of the world: a desert is a desert, and only a happy chance like the discovery of oil can bring greater wealth to its people. But Vietnam is neither slum nor desert: it is a rich country, with an intelligent people, capable of excellent work. I cannot believe that they will not make a success of their country, and that without degenerating into totalitarian ideas.

The essential outlook is quite clear. It is useless to demand freedom unless your mind is already free. The long years of dependence on France have affected some people strongly.

One minister criticized the French roundly for what they had done or failed to do in Vietnam. "Yes, true, they have now allowed us to have an army," he said at last. "Now they must give it a soul."

I pulled him up very sharply. Neither the French nor any other foreigners can give a soul to the Vietnamese army, or to any other organization. The point is important: the French can supply rifles to the army or ploughs for the ricefields, but nothing they do will touch the soul of Vietnam. This is a task for the Vietnamese alone.

## EPILOGUE

### I

SINCE I completed this record, the situation in Indo-China has been affected by important events.

The first marked a possible change in the military outlook. A new French commander, General Navarre, was appointed, and made it clear that he did not favour a supine policy of holding forts and awaiting Viet Minh attacks. Instead of gratefully accepting the unofficial truce dictated by the rainy season, he struck hard—and unexpectedly.

His first bold operation was a brilliant success. There was an important Communist base at Lang Son, ninety miles north-east of Hanoi, and less than twenty-five miles from the Chinese frontier. It held bitter memories for the French, for in 1950 a force penetrated thus far, was ambushed, and retired with heavy losses. Since then it had become an important Viet Minh supply centre.

Maybe the Communists had grown careless; or maybe the strain of widespread battlefronts had depleted their forces. French Intelligence sources discovered that the base was only weakly defended. Hence, on July 17th, 1953, several battalions of French and Vietnamese parachutists descended upon it, captured it with little loss, and destroyed 5,000 tons of military material, including 1,000 Tommy guns; this represented about three months' Chinese supplies to Viet Minh.

At the same time a strong force pushed northwards from the delta, to cover the retirement of the parachutists. This was successfully accomplished, and the whole operation cost amazingly few casualties.

A few weeks later General Navarre struck again. A force of 10,000 men landed by sea and air twenty miles north of Hué,



and proceeded to clean up a triangle of territory long held by Viet Minh.

I am told that these actions had a perceptible effect on morale in Indo-China—among civilians as well as soldiers. If General Navarre can wrest the initiative, and force or induce the Communists to fight on his terms, he will win. But the northern delta remains the key to the situation. General Navarre recognized this in his first appreciation of the position. While proclaiming his intention to 'react offensively' he pointed out that the Viet Minh had eight divisions ready for battle—had never been so strong.

At the same time the Emperor Bao Dai announced that the numbers of his people under arms now exceeded those of the French forces in Indo-China, with more to come. This build-up of strength may increase the Viet Minh determination to strike early and in force. If they do not overrun the Red River delta during the winter of 1953, the chance may never recur. Their infiltration has been increasingly active, and the easy success of the Laos campaign is reported to have raised the morale of their troops. I have argued that the Viet Minh can never hope to achieve power until the delta is theirs: but an unsuccessful attempt to secure it would be a serious blow. On the other hand, a considerable Viet Minh success here or elsewhere *before* the post-Korea conference could give the Communists useful bargaining points.

The second event was a new French 'Solemn Declaration' to the three states of Indo-China—I read of this with especial pleasure, for it went far to fulfil the hope I had expressed earlier in this report. (I do not, of course, pretend that my arguments in Saigon and Paris had anything to do with the making of the offer—its necessity was obvious to any impartial observer.) Early in July 1953, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were offered revisions of the 1949 and 1950 agreements which would complete their control of their own affairs—economic, judicial, military and political. Some of the discontents I had encountered—like the Mixed Courts—were covered by its provisions. All the powers previously reserved to France on account of the perilous situation caused by the war would now be transferred to 'complete the independence and sovereignty of the three Associated States'. In effect, this means full independence

within the French Union—this latter was implied in the offer.<sup>1</sup>

The proposal is not quite the same as dominion status in the British Commonwealth, for the French Union is a more closely defined and rigid structure, with its own Council and Assembly of representatives from all its associated states. The organization has not yet got into its stride, and has no legislative powers: it is intended as a general discussion and advisory centre for member states; it studies bills and propositions which they submit to it, and in particular advises the President on foreign affairs and defence. Herein lies its principal difference with the loose organization of the British Commonwealth.

<sup>1</sup> Since the French offer is likely to be the subject of much discussion, it is worth while to quote the essential paragraphs in full.

"The Government of the French Republic, in formal session, has studied the relations of France with the Associated States of Indo-China. It considers that the moment has come to adapt the agreements concluded between them and France to the position they have succeeded in establishing—with its full support—in the community of free people.

"France, respecting national traditions and human liberties, has led Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam through nearly a century of co-operation to the full maturing of their individuality, and has maintained their national unity. By the 1949 agreements she gave them back their independence, and they consented to associate themselves with her in the French Union.

"The Government of the French Republic to-day wishes to make a solemn declaration. During the four years since the signing of these agreements the brotherhood in arms between the armies of the French Union and the national armies of the Associated States has grown ever stronger, thanks to the growth of the latter which every day play a larger part in the struggle against the common enemy. At the same time, the civil institutions of the three nations have equipped themselves to assume all the powers which devolve on modern states; while their Governments now enjoy the recognition of a majority of the countries which form the United Nations Organization.

"France considers that these conditions justify the completion of the independence and sovereignty of the Associated States of Indo-China by the transference, in agreement with each of the three Governments concerned, of those powers which she has hitherto retained, in the interests of the States themselves, on account of the perilous situation created by the state of war.

"The French Government has decided to invite each of the three Governments to agree with it on the settlement of such questions as each shall see fit to pose, in the economic, financial, judicial, military, and political fields, while respecting and safeguarding those legitimate interests of each of the contracting parties. The Government of the Republic expresses its hope that agreement on these various points will serve to make closer the friendship which unites France and the Associated States within the French Union."

At the same time it was announced that relations with the three states would be the direct responsibility of the French Prime Minister himself; and an experienced diplomat of high and liberal reputation, M. Maurice Dejean, was appointed Commissioner-General in Indo-China—an appointment of responsibility, not unlike that of Mr. Malcolm MacDonald in South-East Asia.



The French note was in a way remarkable, since before it could be sent agreement had to be reached between wide extremes of political opinion. The subsequent negotiations could be uneasy; the governments of Indo-China know quite well that some of the French parties agreed to the offer unwillingly, under pressure of events. On the other hand, M. Reynaud asserted that the independence of the states will in future be limited by nothing except what the states themselves, as equals with France, freely consent to. In fact, he believed that considerations of self-defence would deter the states from opting out of the French Union.

General Navarre showed that his rapid appreciation of the situation was not superficial. He declared that the war was really a politico-military one, and emphasized the importance of the French proposals. "They must lead to total independence, for only that independence is capable of bringing them (the Associated States) completely into the war and of allowing the non-Communist elements now fighting in the ranks of the Viet Minh to break away."

(He also showed his moral courage in evacuating the isolated hedgehog of Na Sam, in July 1953, thus releasing 10,000 fighting troops for offensive operations.)

The three states would be well advised to consider the offer most seriously. A disquieting atmosphere is arising in France. "Why should we bleed to death for countries in which we no longer have any stake, and which apparently want to be rid of us?" A spread of such war-weariness could lead as far as a French withdrawal—which, it cannot be emphasized too often, would mean disaster for Indo-China.

The Emperor Bao Dai consulted the Nationalist leaders in Vietnam, and made his way to Paris announcing that he sought something like the equivalent position of Pakistan in the British Commonwealth. It seems to me that he has this within his grasp, in deed if not in word. I have argued that it would be no more than elementary common sense for the three states to remain within the French Union, but if they wished to leave there is no power which could stop them. My judgment is that the Emperor is too astute to miss the substance for the shadow.

The third episode is an obvious increase in Chinese interest. Military supplies to Viet Minh have been considerably in-

creased, and Chinese anti-aircraft batteries have been reported along the supply routes—a new feature, which could be significant.

The Chinese have also proceeded further with their conception of a new Thai state, Communist controlled. Though originally founded on the tiny 'autonomous' territory of Cheli, in China, it has now extended not only into West Tonkin and Laos, but into Burma. True, frontiers in this part of the world are ill-defined, but Mongsi has always been considered as part of Burma—but is now proclaimed as the capital of the new Thai state. The authority of the Burmese government in the outlying provinces is so weak that no effective protest has been made. Since the Viet Minh penetration into Siam has been maintained, with a point of infiltration at Monghet, the Chinese conception of a puppet Thai state which will eventually include the whole of Siam becomes clear; it has increased local nervousness, but has not provoked counter-action.

In Indo-China the move is connected with the fourth and most important event—the armistice in Korea. If the Communists will, this releases for action elsewhere dozens of well-equipped and seasoned fighting divisions. Even a small proportion of these, infiltrated into the Viet Minh forces as 'volunteers', could transform the battle ground. The Vietnamese hope that the Americans have made it quite clear that such an extension of the war would be sternly countered—would, indeed, mean the open implication of China, with consequent reprisals. There are signs that American opinion is clearer on this point than is that in Europe. There are hopes in Vietnam that the arguments will not be limited to Korea, and there seems to be an increasing American opinion that Indo-China could be used as a test of Chinese sincerity. It is certain that if the armistice in Korea merely means that the conflict has been transferred to Indo-China, then we have gained nothing.

## II

This point has been frequently mentioned in the course of my record. The war in Indo-China is not a self-contained conflict, but an incident in a world-wide struggle, a gigantic half-



circle of contest which ranges from the Baltic to Alaska. Economically the front is dominated by two bastions representing oil and rice. If the latter falls into Communist hands, pressure on the Middle East would certainly increase. 'Peace is indivisible', the Russian Litvinov declared, with truth. So is war—an unpleasant fact which the Western democracies have only recently begun to appreciate.

Their peoples, in general, are moralizing and sentimental. In 1940 they came within a dangerously narrow distance of defeat because they had consistently refused to face the real character of the Nazi menace. Few responsible men or parties escape without blame. When Mr. Neville Chamberlain returned from his appeasement of Hitler he was cheered by Labour Members of Parliament as well as Conservatives—and by tens of thousands of ordinary people. Mr. Baldwin has been much criticized for his statement, in 1936, that he would have lost the previous election if he had advocated re-armament—but his statement was perfectly true. Too often the heart has governed the head; sentimentality is a poor guide in the realism of foreign affairs.

It may be that we face a similar set of circumstances. Largely by Russian ineptitude, we have been forced to the acceptance of a Cold War, with its many inconveniences, as a regrettable necessity. But we are always looking for the cheap and easy way out. In its early days we purchased our own temporary security by the sacrifice of our allies, like Poland and Czechoslovakia. Then, at last aroused, we formed the alliance of Atlantic powers; this, firmly maintained, could guarantee the world against total war. I am convinced that the Russian leaders do not want a world war, if only for the very practical reason that they would be very likely to lose it.

The present scheme is much more cunning. War devastates half a dozen countries, and threatens many others; the resources of the democratic powers are affected—without the loss of a Russian soldier! There being no open intervention, the danger of a major war is avoided.

Indo-China should always be viewed against this background. Historians may select it as a classic example of a process which, designed to weaken the Western democracies, can be camouflaged as a 'liberation movement' prompted by local patriots.

The Korean armistice will bring the issue to the fore—and

not necessarily to our advantage. We may claim that aggression was halted in Korea, but in most parts of Asia the armistice is reckoned as a Communist victory. If there is any sign of weakening, it will certainly be so interpreted in Vietnam—and I have indicated that the outcome there might easily be decided by public conference, so easily swayed.

There are liberal democrats who urge that the Korean armistice should be used as the occasion for opening discussions with the Viet Minh. While I would never refuse conversations with anyone, I can see no reasonable prospects of success in present circumstances. With Ho Chi Minh holding his present power, it is quite obvious at the best he would only compromise at the price of a wide share in the government of Vietnam—and there are enough examples of this form of infiltration to serve as a salutary warning. If negotiations are opened, the Chinese should be the participants rather than Viet Minh.

Presumably we have had enough warnings of what happens to a government which admits Communists—especially as Ho Chi Minh would certainly demand real power as his price for peace. Alternatively, he might offer to leave the southern half unmolested if he were granted undisputed authority over Tonkin. By this Vietnam would be divided—exactly like Korea!

Our sentimental yearnings have been emphasized by events since the death of Stalin. Every 'conciliatory' move is hailed as a step towards a new elysium. The disgrace of a tyrant like Beria is accepted as a concession to democracy! Yet there is no real sign of any change in major Russian policy—the present moves are tactical, not of principle. We have to deal with men who for thirty years have absorbed Marxian-Leninism, and nothing else; its materialism and fatalism—its 'inevitable' evolution in human society, culminating in the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is appreciated that the world revolution may take time—decades, or centuries—but its success is held to be certain. There is a well-known passage of Stalin's where he describes the process as 'an entire historical era, replete with civil wars and external conflicts, with organizational work and economic construction. . . . This historical era is needed to create the economic and cultural prerequisites for the complete victory of socialism.'

What can a casual armistice mean to men who *believe* that



civil wars and external conflicts are *needed* in order to attain their ends? It was significant that when Malenkov replied to Eisenhower's investigatory advances, he specifically claimed that the 'liberation movements' in Asia and elsewhere must continue.

The Cold War is curiously named, for some of its facets involve open combat. It may prove, indeed, that the Cold War is the third World War. It is important for us to realize that we can win it, if we are really determined. After a weak and hesitant start, we are now doing better. The frantic Russian effort to separate U.S.A. from its European allies is an adequate proof of the influence of the Atlantic Pact. And of far greater importance than honeyed words from Moscow were the events of June 17th, 1953, in Eastern Germany—confirming, as some of us suspected, that the Russian hold on her satellites was not nearly as strong as she imagined. For the first time since the Cold War began, Russia is on the defensive.

We cannot afford to sustain a defeat in South-East Asia. Early in my report I showed that a Communist victory in Indo-China would lead inevitably to complete domination of the whole region. This would have great effects on the world's economy—especially that of Britain, where the standard of living would certainly fall. The moral effects would be startling—probably the whole of Asia would be lost to democracy.

Such gloomy anticipations need not be fulfilled; if we are resolute, they will never happen. The first essential is a clear appreciation of the scene, and its presentation in its true colours. Why, for example, should British official reports refer to 'bandits' in Malaya? Why not Chinese Communists—as the overwhelming majority of the terrorists are? I would plead, too, for far greater coverage of the issues in the popular press. The serious reader can get to the truth of the situation, but the majority of our population—and voters—are affected by paragraphs or even headlines. It is argued that football pools are much more interesting than wars in Indo-China, and that people are entitled to have what they want. If this is true, eventually they will get what they do *not* want; but I do not hold so low a view of the intelligence of the democratic peoples.

The death of Stalin and the turn in the fortunes of the Cold War have lowered political tensions without changing objectives.

We should use any moment of advantage; Indo-China is a test case.

Many reports on Indo-China in French and British newspapers have been so pessimistic in tone as to cause 'alarm and despondency'—save in the Viet Minh ranks, where they were welcomed with glee. It might be worth while searching for their inspiration! Other reports of internal dissension are unfortunately not without foundation. Political and religious groups in Vietnam are tending to be adopted by comparative groups in France—and other foreign countries. This could be dangerous. Any form of internecine strife at such a moment can only strengthen the power of Viet Minh. It is madness to dispute forms and factions of patriotism in the face of an enemy who would destroy them all.

Once the scourge of war is removed, Vietnam could recover rapidly, especially after friendly help to efface its devastations. Unlike other countries regaining nationhood, it is potentially a rich country. The French have done excellent work in laying the foundations of progress, and can be just as beneficent when they lay down the role of tutor and adopt that of friend.





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